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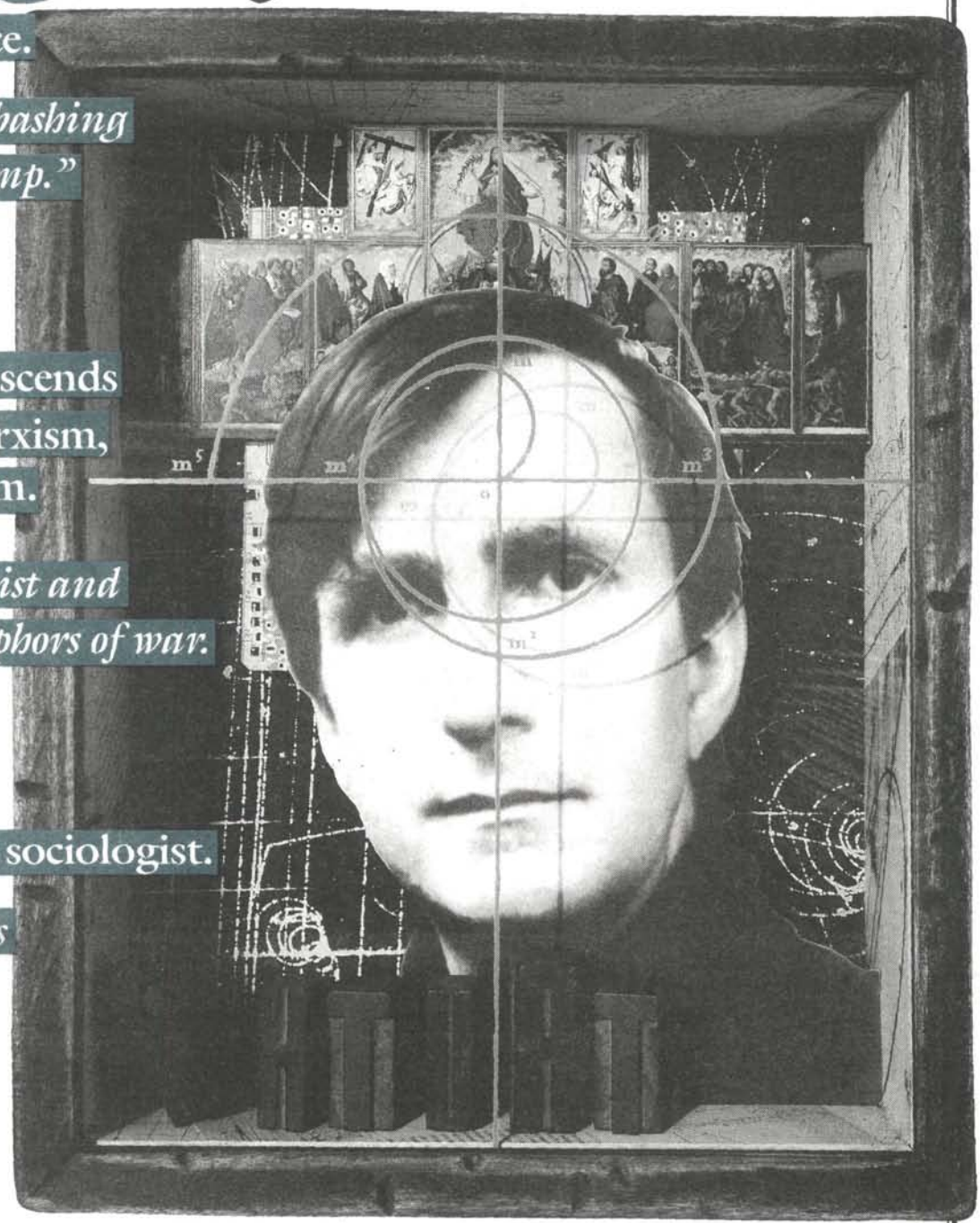

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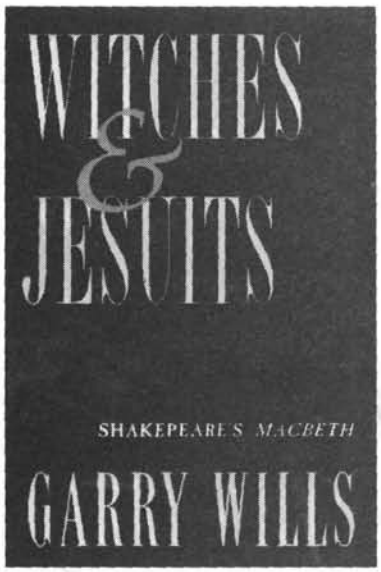

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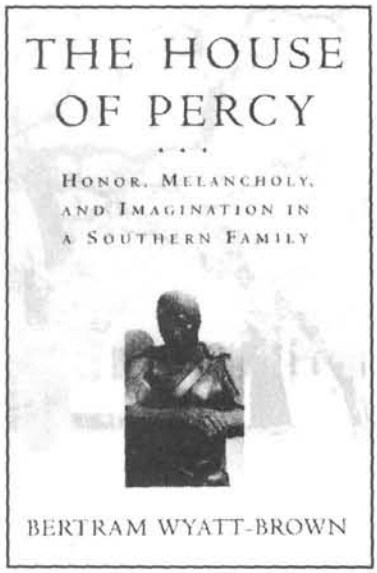

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Letters to the *Editor*

DISSONANT NOTES

I'm starting to dread the arrival of *Lingua Franca*. First, the January/February 1994 issue [Jobtracks] reported my hiring by UCLA before I even had a firm offer—a gaffe that created havoc in four institutions. And now "A *Female* Deer?: Looking for Sex in the Sound of Music" [August 1994], an article by Alex Ross on my work, especially *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*.

From his cute title and his question "Why sex?," to his dismay over my having introduced gendered categories into the interpretation of Brahms, Ross seeks to cast doubt over my entire enterprise. But it doesn't take a radical revisionist to observe that Monteverdi, Beethoven, and Prince put into public circulation in their music very different versions of the body, masculinity, desire, and pleasure. As a historian and critic, I am principally engaged in examining ways in which the cultural medium of music participates in shaping shared notions of subjectivity, affect, gender, and much else.

None of these issues would appear scandalous in most academic disciplines today. But many classical-music scholars still maintain the nineteenth-century German idealist belief that music transcends words and "mere" social meanings. Ross warns of the dangers of talking about musical meanings, making it clear that he wants to protect the standard repertory from the kinds of questions I am posing. But it seems to me that the "danger" is in prohibiting the discussion of meanings that circulate within a whole range of repertories, all with particular histories and relations to social power. He also fears what might happen if students were allowed to think about such issues, for he seems to believe that the canon is too fragile to withstand cultural criticism. In my experience, however, what alienates people from classical music is the insistence of its champions that it signifies nothing at all. Strange though it may seem, I have an excellent track record at attracting students to classical music. Yet because I am also committed to contemporary musical cultures, I treat the nineteenth-century German canon not as Ross's Absolute, but as one of many historical practices.

Ross complains that *Feminine Endings* contains no women, yet half the book deals only with women: Diamanda Galas, Janika Vandervelde, Laurie Anderson, Madonna. Obviously, he does not think these are the *right* women, and he lists those who would count for him. But my book is not a survey of female composers; it concerns cultural representations of gender and eroticism, and I selected women explicitly engaged with such projects. Ross also claims that I believe all gay men share some essence that makes their music always sound gay. But this is not my position. I neither think that gay men are all alike nor that their music has to have anything to do with their sexuality. Yet some artists are now (and sometimes have been in the past) motivated by their experiences to modify the conventions they inherited or to experiment with new possibilities. Not because of a gay essence that always betrays itself, but because they want to produce other images and constructions of subjectivity within cultural terrains already saturated with assumptions about "proper" masculinity.

I cannot in this space reiterate my arguments for how Laurie Anderson produces in her music models of female subjectivity that challenge traditional representations of women or for how Schubert constructs versions of the self that differ from those that were taken by nineteenth-century critics as the standard of masculinity. I can only recommend that interested readers look for themselves at my books and articles.

Susan McClary, *Professor of Musicology*, UCLA

Alex Ross replies:

My article was written with the idea of finding a middle ground between con-

continued on page 75

Letters to LINGUA FRANCA *should be typed double-spaced and be accompanied by the correspondent's name, address, and telephone number. Letters may be edited for clarity or length.*

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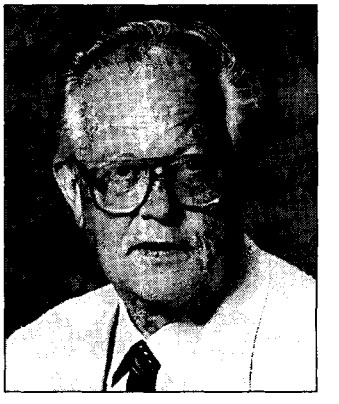

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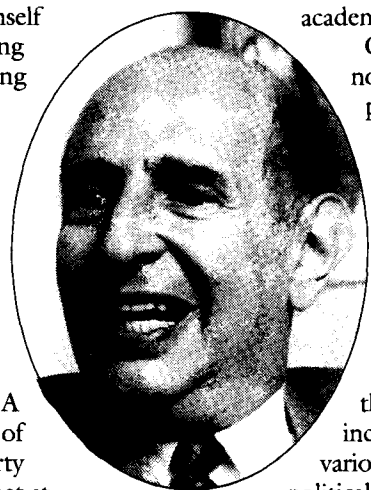
Field *Notes*

SOMEWHERE, ALLAN BLOOM IS SMILING

ONE COULD BE FORgiven for thinking that the time for MLA-bashing was over; that the excesses of that beleaguered organization had begun to bore the most boring of cultural doomsayers; and that if a group of MLA detractors were going to form an alternative alliance, they would have done so in 1987, say, or 1988. But in fact it has taken the great unbrainwashed until now to come together and form the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics (ALSC); perhaps it is only fitting that a group so averse to trendiness is raising its flag half a decade after its moment has passed.

The ALSC originated late last year as a kind of chain letter from John M. Ellis, a professor of German at UC Santa Cruz, and Ricardo Quinones, a Dante scholar at Claremont McKenna College. Around a dozen founding members met at UC Irvine last February to draft a recruiting note and mission statement, which they mailed to like-minded friends. The association has since attracted more than 300 members, including poet and critic John Hollander of Yale; grouchy traditionalist E.D. Hirsch Jr. of Virginia; *Raritan* editor Richard Poirier of Rutgers; French surrealism specialist Anna Balakian, emerita of NYU; and Tennyson expert Christopher Ricks of Boston University. Hollander had himself been thinking about starting an alternative literary organization, and contributed a list of around a hundred potential candidates. A core group of thirty to forty members met at BU on September 10 to plan the first ALSC conference.



Allan Bloom

"The aim is truth and beauty," says Robert Greer Cohn, who recently organized a memorial for high culture.

The primary motive for forming the group, its members say, was to encourage more diversity in literary study. Not so much diversity in the ethnicity department as a diversity of critical approaches. To this end, the organization has decided to make an effort to recruit book reviewers, editors, and novelists. "Someone like John Gross, who writes for *The New York Review of Books*, would be ideal," says Ellis, now ALSC secretary-treasurer (at press time Gross was not a member). "There's a danger of becoming too unreal and rarefied in the academy."

Quinones, now ALSC president, claims that the association's membership covers the entire spectrum of literary thought, including the various kinds of political criticism many members inveigh against. Members hope that the ALSC will not go on record as favoring particular methods, since this might inhibit dissent. They don't want the organization to be "subject to easy political definitions," as Quinones puts it. "We hope there will be genuine debate," he says. "That's the only way one approaches truth, I imagine." (Patricia Meyer Spacks, current MLA president, naturally agrees. "I think any new literary organization is a gain," she told *Lingua Franca*. "Any opportunity for reading papers will enrich all of us. And I think anyone who reads through our very large program will be persuaded that there is enormous variety at the MLA.")

The ALSC is thinking about organizing a hiring hall at future conferences and starting up a journal. The group will be funded by "minimal" dues as well as by contributions from individuals, institutions, and foundations "that support our aims," says Quinones. One foundation (Quinones won't say which one) has already promised a grant, but can't hand over the money until the IRS gives the association tax-exempt status.

In its quest for diversity, the organization has decided to court an eclectic membership in terms not only of methodology and affiliation but also of language. Unlike the English Institute, a literary association founded just over fifty years ago for similar reasons (a group of professors, including Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, wanted to see more variety in textual interpretation than the MLA was offering at the time), the ALSC admits specialists in all languages and is open to classicists. To many members, though, fostering diversity means one thing above all: bringing once again to the literary fore the aesthetic and philological considerations which, they believe, have been the hardest hit victims of Theory hegemony. Says Hollander, "Most of us want to meet others who believe there is some kind of individual imagina-

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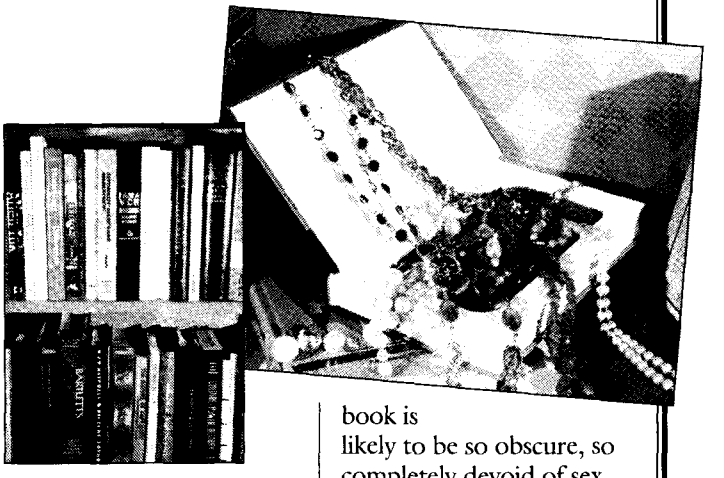
tion whose works have to be understood in terms of history, but also transcend it." "The aim is truth and beauty," says Robert Greer Cohn, a Mallarmé scholar and professor emeritus at Stanford who recently organized a "Humanities and Arts Memorial" to mourn the death of high culture. "We're united in horror at how standards have been dragged down in the name of politics, a sort of flattening process to make everyone more equal. It's been tried before—in the Soviet Union."

—Diana ben-Aaron

STEAL THIS BOOK



BOOKS ARE SUPPOSED TO end their lives on the remainder table. It's a humiliating demise, to be rejected so publicly, but at least it holds out some hope of finding a reader. Sometimes, though, a book meets a fate worse than remainder purgatory. It is recycled out of the publishing industry entirely, eviscerated of its content, and made into a thief-fooling jewelry box: its cover, dust jacket, and first few dozen pages are left intact; its remaining pages, glued into a solid block against the back cover, are hollowed out to form a cavity in which you can store something valuable—secure in the knowledge that the book is likely to be so obscure, so completely devoid of sex appeal, that not even a dinner guest will disturb it.

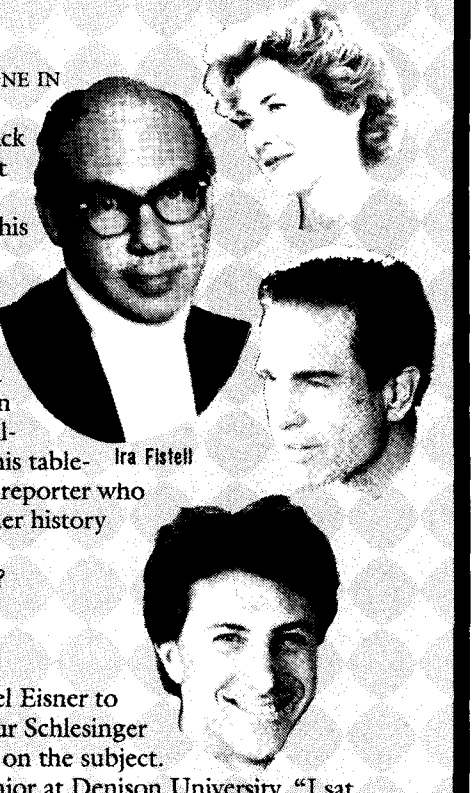
There is a respectable tradition of using books as camouflage for treasure, dating back at least to the eighteenth century. The Swedish naturalist Daniel Carl Solander, traveling

PHOTOS BY LEO TOUCHET

THE ADVANTAGES OF HISTORY FOR LIFE

SUDDENLY YOU'RE AWAKE AND SWEATING. IT WAS THAT DREAM AGAIN—THE ONE IN which Annette Bening hires you to tutor her in history and is so dazzled by your brain that she decides to seduce you. Well, dream on. But as you go back to sleep, consider the case of Ira Fistell, once a graduate student in history at the University of Wisconsin, for whom that dream has become reality.

Well, almost. Fistell was hired by Hollywood superlawyer Bert Fields and his wife, art dealer Barbara Guggenheim, to emcee their monthly history dinners, which, according to *Premiere* magazine, have become one of the hottest tickets in town: only sixteen seats (seminar size) at the table and the chance to trade historical facts and quips with the likes of Dustin Hoffman, Warren Beatty, and, yes, Annette Bening. Fistell, who was a syndicated talk-show host on KABC in Los Angeles for fifteen years until he was fired in 1992, apparently knows how to run a class. When his lectures on, say, Hamilton and Jefferson begin to drag, or when Dustin starts whispering jokes to his tablemates, Fistell peppers the guests with questions. According to a *Vanity Fair* reporter who observed one of these classes, Mike Medavoy, a big studio honcho and former history major, answers most of them.



Ira Fistell

Fistell: *When emancipated slaves were sent back to Africa, where did they go?*

Medavoy: *Monrovia, Liberia.*

Fistell: *Named for whom?*

Medavoy: *James Monroe.*

Too bad Fields and Guggenheim have not yet invited Disney head Michael Eisner to attend a history dinner—Eisner's recent skirmishes with historians like Arthur Schlesinger Jr., David McCullough, and C. Vann Woodward appear to have soured him on the subject. Eisner told *The Washington Post* that when he was an English and theater major at Denison University, "I sat through many history classes where I read [historians'] stuff, and I didn't learn anything."

—R.J. Lambrose

PHOTOFEST

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with Captain Cook in the South Seas in the late 1760s, constructed a book-shaped case to hold the manuscript records of the voyage, and his name became synonymous with the invention. In more recent times, academic books have become solander favorites, prized for the very qualities that made them backlist rejects in the first place. Perhaps the largest collection of academic books to be thus reincarnated was a shipment of 10,000 Stanford University Press volumes sold to Forever Safe of Visalia, California, in 1989. Terry Ommen, co-owner of the company, was looking for a West Coast publishing house from which he could buy a large quantity of thick books for ten cents apiece.

"Some books are so esoteric, even if you tried to give them away, who would take them?"

"These 10,000 truly were in the category of publishing mistakes," says Bob Lloyd, marketing manager at Stanford. "There was no market for them beyond the audience they'd already reached. No matter how much money I spent making sure people knew about them, I would never have sold another one." Even the remainder houses wouldn't have been interested. Says Lloyd, "Some books are so esoteric, even if you tried to give them away, who would take them? You have be so specialized to read the things." Even so, he says, "we had to decide whether it was even worth assembling the books and putting them on skids for $1,000."

Of course, Stanford *means* to keep its books in print forever, Lloyd says, but "if the rate of sale is only ten a year and we have a thousand in stock, that's a hundred-year supply." Back in the days when it owned its own printing plant, Stanford issued a lot more books. Press runs are more conservative these days; since photocopying and interlibrary loans have become more efficient, libraries have been buying fewer books. Besides, short-run reprints can be made from microfilm for not much more than the price of the original book, so underprinting is no longer a problem.

Forever Safe's solanders are relatively down-market—they don't have false fronts of real pages to cover their cavities—and they are cheap, at $7 each, including delivery. Department 10G of New York City, another solander vendor, sells its products for $6.50 wholesale, but they are marked up to $49.95 in paranoia boutiques like the Counter Spy Shop of New York City and Washington, D.C. (The Counter Spy Shop also sells electronic listening devices that fit into solanders, perhaps presaging an expanding future for book-shaped objects.) A company called Department 10G also tends to use mainstream trade books, such as *The Tommyknockers,* by Stephen King; *Unto the Sons,* by Gay Talese; and *Father, Son & Co.,* by

LOVING THAT IRON CAGE

Max Weber

IRVING KRISTOL ONCE WROTE *TWO CHEERS FOR CAPITALISM,* but that wasn't enough. It took Michael Novak's *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* to break the great piggy bank of academic awards—the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, which came in this year at £650,000 (around $968,500). Sir John M. Templeton, an eighty-one-year-old American-born Brit whom *The New York Times* has called "the dean of global investing," funded the award to honor those judged to have advanced, among other things, "new concepts of the spirit, new and effective ways of communicating God's wisdom and infinite love, [and] creation of new schools of thought." He has insisted that its value always exceed the payoff for the Nobel Prize.

Novak, who started out as an enthusiastic supporter of Vatican II and was a strong opponent of the Vietnam War when he taught at Stanford in the mid-1960s, has lately been producing books that describe capitalism and democracy as mutually reinforcing manifestations of Christian principles and that delineate the corresponding evils of Latin American liberation theology. His opinions, according to the *Times,* have been echoed in the writings of Pope John Paul II and of Margaret Thatcher, who, as it happened, served on the nine-member panel of judges awarding the prize. So it's cheers all around, as Kristol would say. In fact, we do appear to have come full circle. In 1905 Max Weber showed that religion generates capitalism, and it left him feeling depressed. Nearly a century later, Novak shows that capitalism generates religion, and it leaves him feeling like a million bucks. Also worth noting is the fact that while previous winners of the Templeton Prize have included Mother Teresa, last year's winner was the born-again Watergater Charles Colson. Now there's a trajectory to conjure with.

—R.J. Lambrose

CULVER PICTURES

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Thomas Watson Jr. of IBM, with Peter Petre—all relatively new hardbacks, which makes them more likely to be pawed by non-specialist visitors.

When we asked Forever Safe for a sample solander, they sent *I Am a VCR,* by media critic Marvin Kitman (Random House). "I would have preferred to have made the best-seller list," said Kitman when we informed him of the fate of his book, "but since I've made this market, I'm honored. I didn't realize why I was writing that book, and now I know." Forever Safe's bona-fide academic titles include *Madrid and the Spanish Economy,* by David Ringrose (UC Berkeley, 1982); *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution,* by J.L. Talmon (UC Berkeley, 1981); and *Syntactic Argumentation,* edited by Donna Jo Napoli and Emily Norwood Rando (Georgetown, 1979).

There's no documented case of a hapless professor noticing his book on the shelf at a party, pulling it down to reacquaint himself with its witty dedications and thoughtful marginalia, and spilling pearls and diamonds from the pages in Pandoran confusion. Bob Lloyd, for one, says he's never had a complaint from a writer. And perhaps an author's dismay would be mitigated by the prospect of dining out on the story for years to come. How many writers, after all, have had such tangible proof that their book contained a few gems?

—Diana ben-Aaron

PLAYING ONE ON TV

IN A LARGE ROOM REEKING of formaldehyde, Leo Villareal and Eric Nadler, graduate students in New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program, boot up a Macintosh to demonstrate their virtual wares. Nadler holds scissorlike handles attached to elongated plastic rods, which he inserts through four circular openings into an open-sided Lucite box. As he moves the rods around, somewhat jerkily, things happen on a nearby television monitor: yellow, blue, and green crayonlike objects with steel gray pincers appear to sunder an inverted green eggplant from some tubing. Nadler has just snipped a virtual gallbladder from a virtual bile duct using a high-tech surgical technique called laparoscopy. During real surgery, the surgeon does not see with her own eyes the organs upon which she operates either: instead, she makes four small incisions in the abdomen, inserts a tiny camera into one and surgical instruments into the others, and snips and staples while watching the procedure on a TV monitor.

Nadler's rods (which are real surgical instruments), the crayons, and the eggplant are all components of a machine called the Surgical Simulation Tool Kit. If

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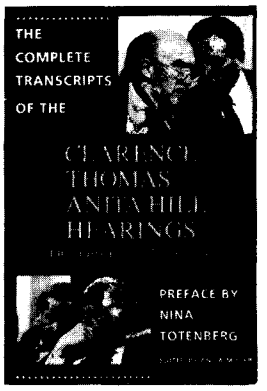

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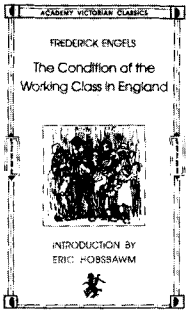
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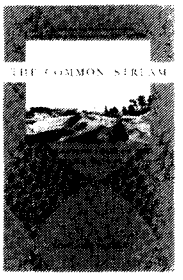

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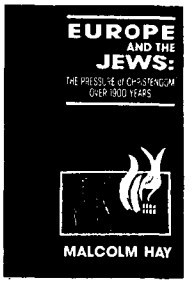

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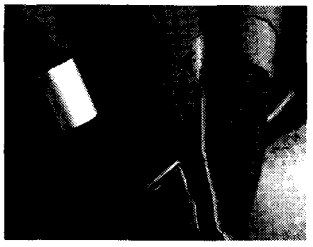

things go as planned, the tool kit will become the next cool virtual-reality device used to teach medical students; but first the machine must be perfected. The graphics on the monitor, now somewhat primitive, must become photorealistic, so as to fool the eye, and the virtual organs must behave more like solid objects, so as to fool the hand. Now, when a stick collides with a virtual liver, the stick meets no resistance and passes through the image of the liver as though it were a shadow. With the help of a professor from the computer science department, the tool kit's designers are constructing a force feedback mechanism that will give the virtual organs a palpable, spongy physicality.

The tool kit was created by the Hippocrates Project at NYU—an interdisciplinary group of faculty and students from the medical school, the Interactive Telecommunications Program, and the computer science department. The project designs computerware for basic science and clinical courses at the medical school. Its psychiatric teaching aid, *Signs and Symptoms of Mental Illness,* a multimedia combination of video footage and text, is probably the eeriest—it offers a voyeur's fantasy selection of "real people with real lives and real families" in the throes of real disorders. The patients sit against blank white walls. The head-on camera angle puts the viewer in the interviewer's chair and creates the ambience of an interrogation rather than a cozy therapy session.

The stark footage is surprisingly enthralling. One woman, who would have

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been incomprehensible without the transcript scrolling beneath the frame, described her hospital as a sort of boarding house run by enthusiastic landlords. She illustrates "Disorientation." Footage of another woman, who speaks in slightly accented English about a man who refused to marry her, accompanies text that defines the "Normal Range of Affect." A grizzled man in white twists around in his chair as he answers the interviewer's simple questions with paranoid descriptions. Another woman, who has the gaunt visage of a drug user, talks about her boyfriend, who takes Thorazine.

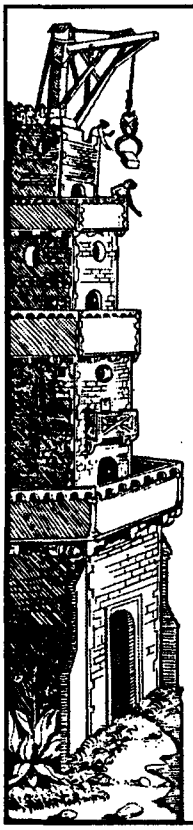
So far, 95 percent of NYU's basic science and 50 percent of its clinical departments have integrated Hippocrates courseware into some aspect of their curricula, though not all faculty members immediately embraced it. "Some [faculty] were computer-phobic and antagonistic," says Martin Nachbar, the Hippocrates Project's director and associate professor of medicine and microbiology at NYU. "They suspected that the computer fostered if not antisocial then asocial behavior. But now many of these same people are the project's strongest allies."

—*Stefanie Syman*

LONG DIVISION

ONCE UPON A TIME, MATHematical life in Moscow revolved around the celebrated mechanics and mathematics department of Moscow University. For more than forty years after Moscow emerged as a world-class mathematics center in the 1920s, the department, known as Mekh–Mat, was the culminating stage of the training that made the Russian mathematical school the proud and romanticized creature it still is. Mathematicians-to-be would compete as teenagers in mathematics olympiads (which originated in Russia and spread to the West), proceed to mathematical high schools, and then matriculate gloriously at Mekh–Mat. There, they would spend the rest of their lives, staying on after graduate school to take part in the department's

"Imagine a building where mathematicians can gather, where our life will be like the Mekh–Mat of old!"



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Field *Notes*

legendary seminars—weekly gatherings to which Moscow mathematicians of all ages came to hear presentations and solve problems together. The Gelfand seminar has met every week for fifty years; the Arnold, for thirty.

Then, in 1968, at the birth of the intellectual-opposition movement, ninety-nine Mekh–Mat instructors signed a letter in support of an imprisoned dissident (Aleksandr Yesenin-Volpin, a mathematician and poet who was committed to a psychiatric hospital for inciting demonstrations), and the central committee of the Communist Party adopted a secret resolution stating that "ideological work at the Mekh–Mat was insufficient." Or so the legend goes. That year, Mekh–Mat's doors closed to Jewish applicants as well as to graduates of mathematical high schools (which apparently bred too much independent thinking), and for the next twenty-two years Mekh–Mat was dominated by mediocrities whose chief credential was their loyalty to the party.

Although the restrictions on Mekh–Mat survived perestroika, they were lifted in 1990. But by that time the department had been so completely taken over by second-rate loyalists that the spirit of the Mekh–Mat glory days was dead forever. So a group of classic-Mekh–Mat nostalgists, most of whom had been graduate students or young postdocs at the time of the central committee decree, decided to build the dream anew. They called their undertaking, rather grandly, the Independent University—an institution, they envisioned, that would become home to what remained of Moscow's mathematical elite. They gathered together a group of mathematicians who were willing to teach for nothing and held entrance exams in the spring of 1991—written, instead of the traditional Russian orals, whose discretionary quality had traditionally been a means to flunk Jews and other undesirables. They accepted forty-five students and even found a mathematician willing to be dean.

But these steps, as it turned out, did not a university make. The Independent has secured provisional accreditation that will allow it to grant diplomas to its first graduates, due in two years—but it cannot get final accreditation until those graduates pass the state boards. Until then, the school cannot offer one of the most coveted benefits of higher education in Russia: a draft deferment. Because of this and the uncertainty of final accreditation, virtually all of the school's students are enrolled at Mekh–Mat as well; most attend Mekh–Mat during the day and the Independent at night. It is an arrangement only the truly devoted can endure, and, indeed, about half of the Independent's first batch of students have dropped out. "You have to be a bit obsessed," says Pavel Yelenkin, who, after two years of attending both schools, is thinking of abandoning the Independent. "No, not a bit—*completely* obsessed. You have to spend all your time doing mathematics."

Still, the Independent prides itself on just surviving, which has not been easy. In the second year of its existence, twelve members of its board saved the university by contributing $100 each (about five times an average monthly salary) to keep it going for six more months; now, grants from the American Mathematics Society and the International Science Foundation cover the salaries of five administrative workers and a stipend of $7 to $30 a month to each student. Still, most of the instructors spend half the year teaching in the West for hard currency and the other half at the Independent for free. "In a sense, we have nothing," says Askold Khovansky, a Mekh–Mat graduate (as are his wife and two daughters) and a founder of the Independent. "We have no building, we have no money, we don't have final accreditation. You'd think this thing would be dead."

Will the school survive? Aleksandr Shen, a legendary Moscow mathematical–high-school instructor who has also taught at the Independent, thinks it unlikely. "A lot of people are leaving the country," he says. "Soon there won't be anyone left—no teachers, no students." Others hope that the place will get by on the labor of mathematicians who teach abroad but want a stimulating place to spend part of their time.

Khovansky is one of the optimists. "Imagine a building," he muses, "where mathematicians can gather to work and discuss, where our life will be like the Mekh–Mat of old!" Even he acknowledges that at this point everything depends on the dedication of the few mathematicians the school has enticed onto its faculty. "But then," he says, "isn't dedication the only true moving force in the world?"

—Masha Gessen

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BREAKTHROUGH BOOKS ETHOLOGY

We asked four experts in ethology to tell us about the most interesting books in their field they'd read in the past few years. Here are their responses:

Harriet Ritvo, professor of history at MIT and author of *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Harvard, 1987).

The Hidden Life of Dogs, by **Elizabeth Marshall Thomas** (Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

"Thomas, a novelist and anthropologist, makes a scientifically and intellectually informed case for anthropomorphism. She asserts that dogs have motives that we can understand, and she talks about dog love and friendship in terms we use to describe our own social relations, including marriage. Thomas argues her case in the way that it has traditionally been argued—anecdotally, though she is very much aware of the mixed reputation of anthropomorphism and anecdotal writing. Too often, people who consider themselves serious thinkers ignore both, although neither is unusual. She chooses not to write as a scientist, and even conceals the degree of her expertise; in a way, both her argument and her method are a modern sequel to Darwin's."

Visions of Caliban: On Chimpanzees and People, by **Dale Peterson** and **Jane Goodall** (Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

"This book is an exploration of the ways humans and apes come into contact—in literature, scientific experiments, circuses, households—and amounts to an argument that people do certain troubling things to animals because they are unable to recognize the continuity of mental process between humans and other species. It speculates about, among other things, whether Caliban was a chimpanzee—which is not a wild idea, considering that up until the eighteenth century, scientists were unclear about the boundaries of the human species (they excluded some humans and included some apes). Though the authors come from very different backgrounds (Goodall is a scientist, albeit an eccentric one, and Peterson teaches writing), unlike most coauthored works the book preserves both their voices, allowing for a dialogue between a scientific perspective and a more humanistic one."

Vicki Hearne, author of *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name* (Knopf, 1986) and *Animal Happiness* (HarperCollins, 1994).

Amusements philosophiques sur le langage de bêtes, by **Père Bougeaint**.

"Father Bougeaint, an approximate contemporary of Descartes, begins by announcing that he will spend his spare weekend doing a number on Descartes by proving that animals have language. He describes puppies playing and making false attacks on each other and asks, 'How could they not be laughing?' It's quite charming to read, and all the modern arguments worth a damn are there. Bougeaint trod very carefully to avoid implying that animals have souls (an idea that didn't fly with the Catholic church), but a later edition includes an author's retraction, so I guess they must have gotten to him."

Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate, by **Richard Sorabji** (Cornell, 1993).

"Sorabji is a classical philosopher whom detractors refer to as an argument collector, but he's the only real scholar this field has. He starts *Animal Minds* by examining philosophical treatments of animals in ancient Greece—revealing, for instance, the complexities and political elements of Aristotle's views, which we tend to think of as a flat-out denial of animals' ability to reason. From there he goes on to current thinking and argues that the animal-rights movement is philosophically incoherent (although he does feel strongly that animals should be treated better). His philosophical analysis is so thorough that anyone who's thinking about these issues has an obligation to read this book. He's wrong about my work, but he's wrong in such an interesting way that it's okay."

Nop's Hope, by **Donald McCaig** (Crown, 1994).

"This is a dog novel [for children] in which a dog talks to its handler when no one else is around. It talks in 'thees' and 'thous,' and a reader has to ask why it does that—but, then again, the gap between that and the way people and dogs usually talk to each other isn't much greater than

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the difference between the way people talk to each other in life and the way they talk in most novels. It's about time someone started locating the really worthwhile children's stories about animals that are not just ASPCA propaganda. McCaig is a no-nonsense dog trainer, so *Nop's Hope* has the tremendous advantage of having been written by someone who actually works with dogs."

Daniel Dennett, director of the Tufts Center for Cognitive Studies and author of *Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown, 1991).

Through Our Eyes Only? The Search for Animal Consciousness, by **Marian Stamp Dawkins** (W.H. Freeman, 1993).

"Dawkins, an ethologist in Oxford's zoology department, has written several books that describe her investigations into what animals care about, what they mind, what they'll work through obstacles to get. In this book, she gives the lie to the lazy skepticism that assumes we can never know what it's like to be another animal: we can, she says, we just have to do the work to find out. Dawkins's experiments often have surprising results, such as her discovery that hens have relative preferences (they like bedding to scratch around in, but they'll work less hard to get it than they will for food). This study also has a very serious purpose: helping people get the facts about what's humane and what's cruel."

Machiavellian Intelligence: Social Expertise and the Evolution of Intellect in Monkeys, Apes, and Humans, **edited by Richard Byrne and Andrew Whiten.** (Oxford, 1988).

"There's a lot of interest among ethologists right now in deception and manipulation as practiced between members of the same species—in competition for mates or food, usually—because the attempt to create a false belief requires the knowledge that an organism can be *wrong*. That manipulation of another's perception has to involve a particularly sophisticated intelligence. So researchers are looking for 'strong' cases of deliberate deception, when an animal appears to dream up a strategem for deceiving another.

"In previous works, Byrne and Whiten gathered all the field notes people had taken on the deviousness (what they call the 'Machiavellian ploys') of primates. This book contains reflections by these researchers on the difficulties of conducting this sort of inquiry. The book raises more questions than it answers, but it has pointed the way to a number of successful experiments. It's an inquiry very much in flux, but it is the place to go to see the state of the art."

David DeGrazia, assistant professor of philosophy at George Washington University and author of the forthcoming *Taking Animals Seriously: Methods, Mind and Moral Status.*

The Unheeded Cry: Animal Consciousness, Animal Pain, and Science, by **Bernard Rollin** (Oxford, 1990).

"Early forms of behaviorism promoted the implausible idea that animals had no conscious life, and Rollin, a philosopher at Colorado State University, takes on this idea quite effectively. He shatters several of the myths that stand in the way of attributing rich emotional and cognitive life to higher animals (though I think he misinterprets Wittgenstein's philosophy of language) and discusses what it means for scientists to develop theories denying that animals suffer when they (the scientists) need animals to experiment upon. Most notably, Rollin examines the self-serving ideology of value neutrality. That's a value judgment in itself, says Rollin; let's acknowledge that values permeate science and start looking at a wider variety of evidence."

How Monkeys See the World: Inside the Mind of Another Species, by **Dorothy L. Cheney and Robert M. Seyfarth** (Chicago, 1990).

"This is very much a book by scientists (Cheney and Seyfarth teach biology and psychology, respectively, at the University of Pennsylvania), but it's also substantially informed by philosophy of mind. It begins with the question of what it's like to be a vervet monkey, and asks what kinds of social and family knowledge vervet monkeys have to have. Cheney and Seyfarth discuss, for example, the fact that vervets have different alarm calls, which seem to be semantic, to warn each other of different kinds of danger. What, then, can we attribute to these monkeys in terms of mental processes? The writers also set up controlled experiments to explore the phenomenon of vervet deception—how these monkeys falsely imply the presence of danger to get other monkeys' food, for example. It has been clear for a while that monkeys can express certain things about, and thereby manipulate, their environment, but these experiments do not indicate that they actually have an understanding of other monkeys' mental states."

—Ariel Kaminer

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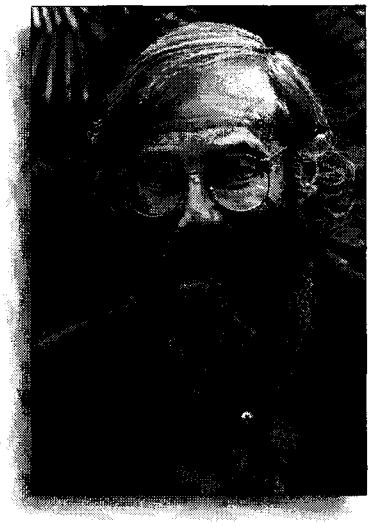

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"Language is interchange between persons. Barry Sanders shows how this feature of language makes some skill in oral discourse a prerequisite for literacy, how familiarity with writing is needed to mature today's sense of the self and of social structures, and how electronic media can seriously disturb the sense of communication as interchange. A fascinating book for parents, teachers of writing, other teachers and scholars, and in fact for everybody. Not alarmist, but alerting."
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Inside *Publishing*

THESAURUS REX

One of the annoying things about dictionaries is that they store words so differently from the way you store them in your head. As a result, they're okay for supplying definitions but useless when you're in search of a word you don't know or can't remember. Thesauruses are better for this, but they supply only synonyms. What if you wanted to recall the name of those crocheted doily things that grandmothers put over the backs of armchairs? Wouldn't it be great if you could look up "armchair" and find out?

Soon, you will be able to. Cognitive psychologist George Miller, a professor emeritus at Princeton, is compiling an electronic dictionary called *WordNet* that, when finished, will connect each word not only to its definition and its synonyms but also to its meronyms (components, as "handle" is to "cup"), holonyms (larger whole, as "cup" is to "handle"), and hyponyms (subsets, as "rose" is to "flower"). The idea is to produce a dictionary that will allow a user to replicate the process of normal language acquisition, as delineated by Miller in his "relational theory": since people don't learn what "hatch" means by memorizing all words beginning with *h* but by learning that "hatch" is the way one describes a certain type of door, Miller has designed his dictionary to guide you to the word "hatch" when you look up "door." *WordNet* also includes a "semantic concordance," which displays the variations of meaning a word can take on in different contexts. Take "take," for example: *WordNet* will define "take time," "on the take," "a quick take," "how much is our take," "take me?" and "take off."

What do you do when you want to recall the name of those crocheted doily things that grandmothers put over the backs of armchairs?

The problem right now, Miller says, is that he needs a warm body to define correct word sense. Current computers can *almost* always recognize the right meaning based on linguistic context, but almost isn't good enough in lexicography. Miller wants to create a computer program with a linguistic awareness as subtle as your average college student's. This explains why Miller has several undergraduates sitting in the Cognitive Science Laboratory at Princeton, scrutinizing the approximately 25,000 nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage,* deciding on the precise sense of each word, and storing the information on *WordNet.* Since 1985, the *WordNet* computers have swallowed some 125,000 words from various texts (word lists like dictionaries, spell-checkers, and thesauruses, as well as newspaper and magazine articles) and generated more than 85,000 word meanings, to the delight of the 250-odd linguists who use the database via the Internet.

Miller's is not the only futuristic dictionary around. Many dictionaries are now available on-line or on CD-ROM—though, as Sue Atkins, a lexicographer and adviser to Oxford University Press, points out, these are pretty much just "paper dictionaries that work faster." The real change, says Atkins, is in how dictionaries are now being built. British publishers are turning to corpora—vast databases of text that include everything from books, letters, leaflets, and newspapers to conversation transcripts and lectures—for examples of how words are used. Oxford, for instance, uses the British National Corpus, which contains more than 100 million words. By searching a corpus of that size, Atkins says, "you can look up 'look' and get over 58,000 sentences using the word, and then sort the sentences by tense and usage."

This year, Oxford and the French publisher Hachette have published an English/French dictionary that is the first bilingual commercial product based solely on corpora. "The definitions are much sharper," claims Patrick Hanks, manager of English dictionaries at Oxford. "There's less of the hedging and fuzziness you find in traditional dictionaries. We are showing how words are actually used." So far, lexicographers are the only people equipped with the software tools to search corpora, but electronic dictionaries will someday provide access to these epic linguistic dominions. As Atkins puts it, the dictionary of the future "will tell you answers to questions you haven't even asked."

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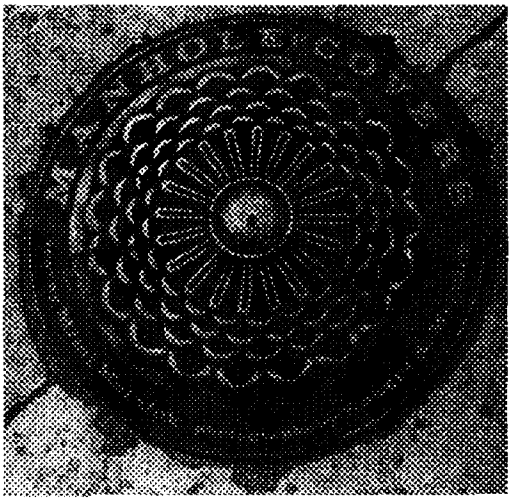
ROADRUNNER, ROADRUNNER

Robert and Mimi Melnick did it in the road. She would watch for oncoming cars; he would snap a quick photo. They spent a decade doing it all over the country. Now the results are being published by MIT Press: some two hundred black-and-white pictures of manhole covers, with written comments by Mimi.

The manhole covers are square, triangular, and rectangular as well as round. There's one known as the Silent Knight that was designed not to rattle when driven over. The real drama, though, is in the op-art geometric patterns, astronomical images, and Moorish arabesques that decorate the covers, many of which are emblazoned with stark declarations like SEWER, WATER, or DRAIN. Some of the covers date from the 1840s, but most were cast between 1880 and 1930—back when manhole covers were produced in American foundries, not in India, Mexico, and China as they are now.



That the U.S. shift from an industrial to a postindustrial economy can be read in the history of manhole covers doesn't surprise Michael Brian Schiffer, a professor of anthropology at the University of Arizona. He's the founder of behavioral archaeology, an approach that, he says, "focuses on the role of objects in our culture." In *The Portable Radio in American Life* (University of Arizona Press, 1991), Schiffer argues that American teenagers fueled the growth of the Japanese consumer-electronics industry in the 1950s by sending shirt-pocket–radio sales sky-high. Another taxonomist of previously unheralded objects is Henry Petroski, professor of civil engineering at Duke and author of *The Pencil* (Knopf, 1990), the definitive word on that humble scrap of wood. As a historian of technology, Petroski scans files of patent drawings and catalogues of items like hammers and silverware to trace the evolution of the objects' designs. Although he relies on primary sources for his own work, he says, he still values the research done by hobbyists like the Melnicks (until he died in 1982, Robert was a computer expert; Mimi is a jazz pianist). Both Schiffer and Petroski believe that amateurs are often the experts on industrial objects.

But Roger Conover, the acquisitions editor for arts and architecture at MIT Press, insists he didn't flip over the Melnick's lids for scholarly reasons: "My response to books is more out of sensibility than discipline." He sees the manhole covers as "street jewelry," and hopes the Melnicks' book will dovetail with other MIT photo collections by Bernd and Hilla Becher, a German husband and wife who have photographed blast furnaces, water towers, and gas tanks. All this may not be your ordinary coffee-table fare, but, as Conover says, he wants to make an aesthetic case for "an appreciation of the ordinary and ugly over the heroic and beautiful. These are all plain pictures, of plain things that become extraordinary."

PUBLISH AND RETAIN YOUR COPYRIGHT OR PERISH

Imagine that you run a widget factory and your workers supply the widgets free to outside companies, which select and polish the best of them, and then sell them back to you at a substantial profit. This may sound like a recipe for bankruptcy, but it's exactly what happens at universities: the faculty publishes school-financed research with commercial presses, and the library must buy back the scholarship in the form of expensive serials, books, and electronic access. The inequity, not to mention the inefficiency, of this transaction is causing many librarians, administrators, and university-press officials to consider how their institutions might retain some control over their scholarly product.

One solution, summarized in an Association of American Universities Task Force report published this past May, calls for faculty members to retain their own copyright, allowing publishers rights on a case-by-case basis. This plan would enable authors to make their work more widely available to colleagues and students. But authors who hold on to their copyright would be handicapped in the competition to place articles in prestigious journals, since publishers

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would doubtless prefer the old arrangement. The authors would also be stuck with the irritating task of managing their copyrights; the more prolific they were, presumably, the more time they'd need to set aside for paperwork.

Another suggestion outlined in the report—joint faculty/university ownership—would at least provide institutions with some financial gain. Schools and scholars would co-own the copyrights, but the schools would cede their share of the royalties to the authors unless a particular work cost a significant sum to produce (perhaps in computer or laboratory time) and generated big dollars. In that case, the university could seek reimbursement from the author. Of course, this would require a renegotiation of faculty contracts and, again, publishers would be less than keen to take on authors from schools that did not give up copyright.

Until one of these plans is adopted, information will keep circulating at ever-higher prices.

Yet another plan discussed in the report has universities forming consortia that would share ownership with faculty. Authors could grant an exclusive distribution license to a commercial publisher for a particular period of time, after which the rights would revert to the consortium and author. In exchange for its share of the copyright, the consortium would guarantee a permanent electronic repository for the work and make materials freely available to all participating institutions, along with anyone else the author chose. This plan has some advantages for everyone: publishers would get first crack at the profits, authors could choose where to publish, and long-term control would rest with the universities.

Until one of these plans is adopted, though, the widgets will keep circulating at ever-higher prices. Marcia Tuttle, a serials librarian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who edits the on-line *Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues,* has decided to deal with the situa-

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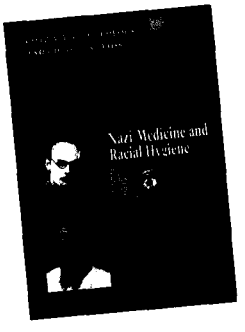
tion by joining what she says is the biggest trend in library thrift: canceling serials and replacing them with document delivery. Last year Tuttle dropped twenty-four subscriptions, thereby saving more than $24,000. After seven months this year, there's been only one request for an article in one of those titles. She ordered the document for $12.75. "But publishers are catching on," she says. "That's why the royalty costs are rising." Copyright enables them to charge whatever the market will bear, and it's hard to imagine they will give up their profits without a fight.

TIME'S MARROW



Should historians trust the writer or the speaker? Are eyewitness reports more reliable than documentation, or does the written word always trump oral testimony? This is the issue raised in *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) by three German authors—Christian Pross, medical director of the Berlin Center for the Treatment of Torture Victims; Götz Aly, a political scientist and historian; and Peter Chroust, a member of the scientific staff of the Zentrum für Historische Sozialforschung at the University of Cologne.

The gruesome medical experiments that *Cleansing the Fatherland* describes are familiar material—they were exposed during the Nuremberg doctors trials of 1946–47. But the book also contains annotated selections from the diaries of German anatomist Hermann Voss. They were buried for decades in the files of the West Institute in Poznan, Poland, where they ended up when Voss fled the advancing Red Army in 1945. The diaries, which cover the years 1932 to 1942, offer a long look into the mind of a German medical scientist who by 1964 was widely regarded as "the most influential and respected anatomist in East Germany," even though he had spent the war years dissecting unmistakably murdered

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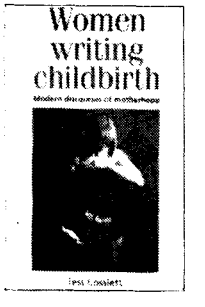

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Inside *Publishing*

Voss's diaries show that Nazi doctors' wartime behavior was consistent with their prewar careerism and greed.

bodies at the Reich University at Posen. The diary entries reveal a man who kept his distance from Nazism because he found it unscientific and vulgar, yet remained loyal to the regime that brought him power.

In his 1986 book *Nazi Doctors,* Robert Jay Lifton, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at John Jay College, explained this kind of contradictory attitude by what he called "doubling"—a personality split that allowed physicians to maintain their pre-Nazi identity as humane healers in tandem with their "Auschwitz-Self." But Pross takes issue with Lifton's analysis, which he believes follows from relying too heavily on oral history. "Oral history," Pross explained in an interview, "is useful for refugees and resisters. They have nothing to hide and, besides, they lack documentation. But for the perpetrators, their testimony is really just a rehearsed legend, and in my many interviews with Nazi doctors I found their testimony totally contradicted by the historical record." In his introduction to *Cleansing the Fatherland,* Pross accuses Lifton of neglecting the "diligent study of documents" in favor of "hearsay." Because Lifton concealed the names of his interviewees, Pross writes, "he did more to obscure than clarify the issues." Pross is convinced that "doubling" didn't exist for German physicians; as Voss's diaries show, Pross points out, the physicians' wartime behavior was consistent with their prewar careerism and greed.

Lifton doesn't feel it's necessary to pit oral testimony against documentation. "We need every insight possible into the minds of perpetrators if we want to expose and combat them," he says. He also defends his practice of maintaining the anonymity of the Nazi doctors he interviewed. "These were psychological interviews, and standards of medical research required me to keep their identities private," he explains. "Ironically, this requirement is a direct result of the Nuremberg doctors trials." —*Albert Mobilio*

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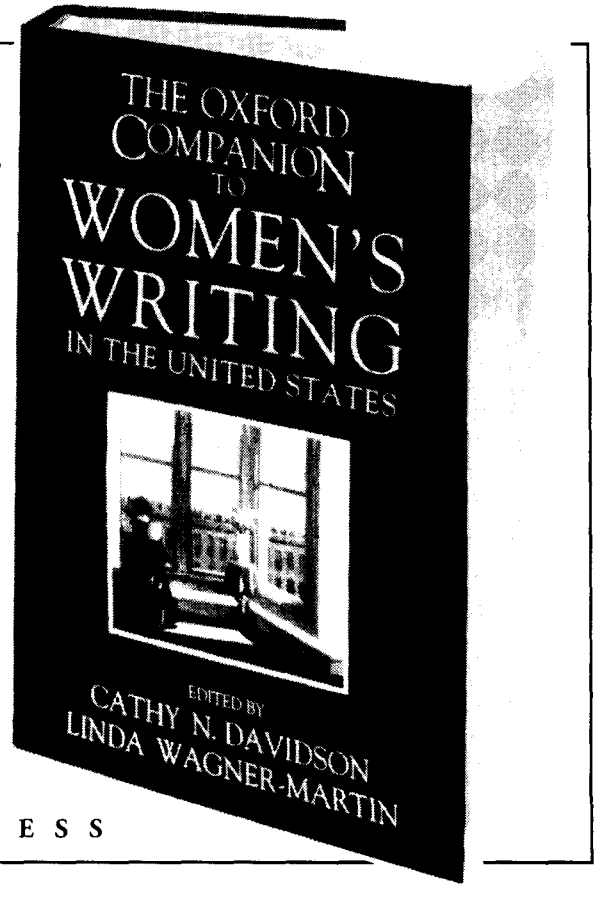

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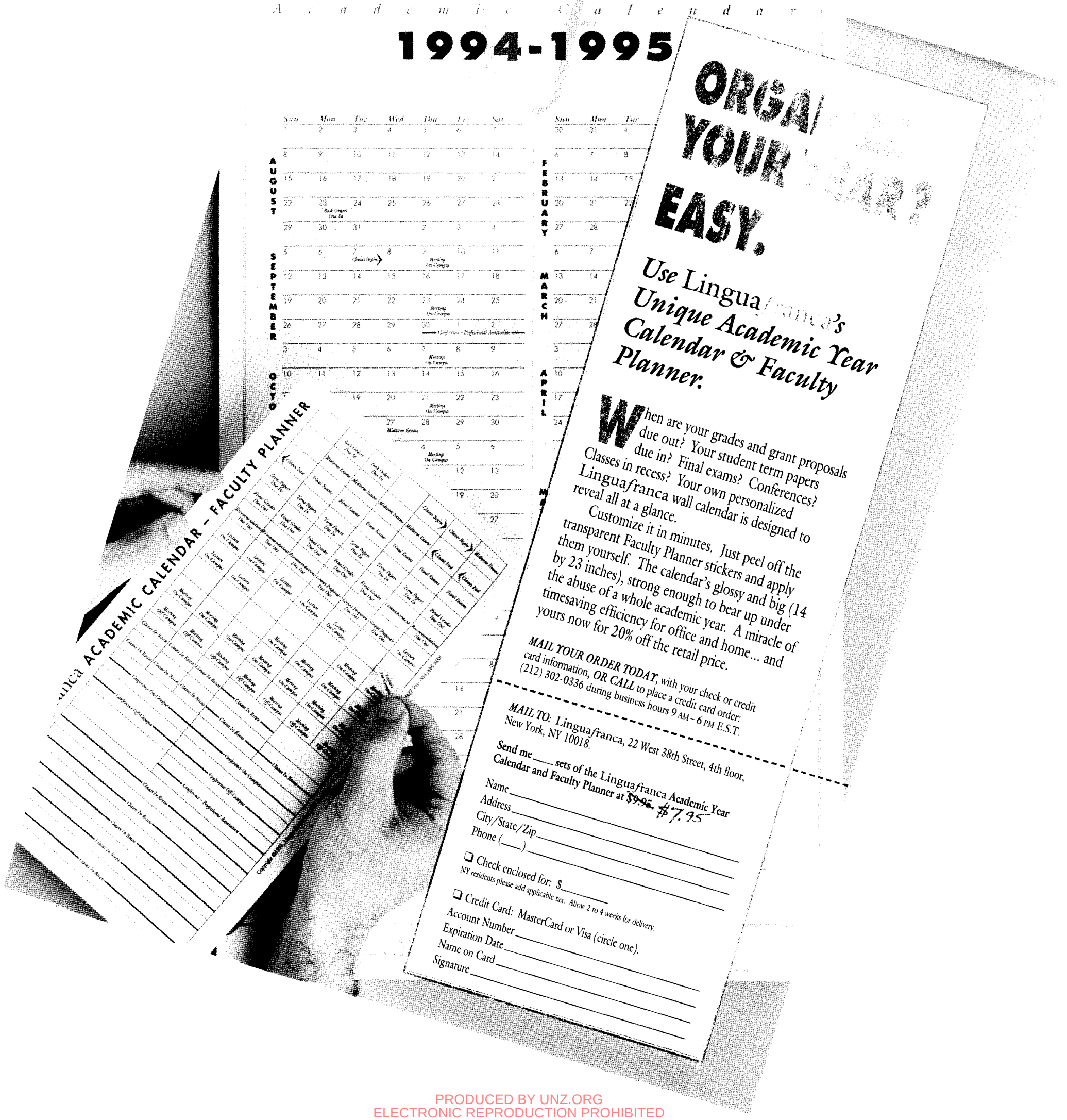
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...that damned elusive BRUNO LATOUR

by David Berreby

Thomas F. Gieryn is going over well. The white shoebox-size gizmo he's dragged all the way to Paris has hooked up to a French Macintosh without a burp, and now the green light is blink-blinking and the compact disc inside is spinning. On the big screen in front of him, pictures flash by: documents, photographs, blueprints. When he clicks on an architect's plans for a laboratory, a photograph of the finished space appears on the screen. Another click, and the scrawled handwriting of an inspector's report pops up. The knot of French graduate students in the basement of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines in Paris is suitably impressed. Exclamations of approval waft over the computers and book-filled metal shelves and institutional green carpeting.

Gieryn, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Indiana at Bloomington, is displaying a hypertextual account of the construction of a biotechnology lab. Gieryn's web of links has no story line, no heroes or villains, no overarching theory about the search for biological truth or even the inescapable social forces that rule the building trade. As he moves from document to interview to photograph, following suggestions tossed out by students, the building comes to seem less like a work of architecture than an organism that somehow assembled itself out of a dense soup of history, science, and politics.

"See, what we've done here," Gieryn says with an eager grin, "is black-box Bruno Latour."

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Sitting on a bookshelf behind his students, Bruno Latour smiles back. Latour is the man who turned "black box"—originally a term in engineering for any device into whose workings one does not peer—into a central concept in the sociology of science. A black box in Latourspeak is any combination of ideas, things, and people whose output is assumed to be truth. Latour is one of the most rigorous thinkers in the loose combination of disciplines known as "science studies"—an amalgam of the sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and rhetoric of science—and if there's one thing he dislikes, it's the naïve concept of truth required to place your faith in a black box. His is an unusually uncompromising brand of skepticism, and though Gieryn plays up to it, elsewhere it has earned Latour little affection. The scientists he studies are used to having their work treated as just such a box—at least by nonscientists—so many of them loathe Latour's approach. And many social scientists who ought to be his allies find him slippery; they interpret his skepticism as a refusal to commit to a methodology. At the moment, though, it is not disengagement that shows on Latour's face. It is amusement. He's clearly entertained by the notion of Gieryn's American undergraduates diligently translating his ideas onto Hypercard.

Cartoon from Latour's *Science in Action* depicting the split between "ordered" scientific myth and "confusing and ambiguous" scientific reality.

Earlier in the day, as Gieryn and Latour traded gossip over lunch in a Paris restaurant, a fax arrived at Latour's office—three pages of a new book, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels With Science,* in which Latour comes in for some particularly extravagant bashing. The book, published last spring by Johns Hopkins University Press and now in its third printing, is a shotgun blast at critical theory in general, but it is particularly cutting in its attacks on science studies. Back in the United States, its rebukes were already prompting exchanges of soul-searching e-mail among science-studies scholars.

Latour, it turns out, is one of the book's most prominent targets. Latour doesn't believe in facts, complain the authors, Paul R. Gross, a former director of the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory, and Norman Levitt, a professor of math at Rutgers. Latour, they say, depicts science as "a savage brawl in which, from day to day, the dominant chieftain is he who assembles, by dint of wealth, prestige, and warrior cunning, the biggest and nastiest gang of henchmen." Objection gives way to protestation—"effrontery is far too mild a word for Latour's wisecracks"—which soon becomes *ad hominem:* Latour is "a Panurgian imp, come to catch all those solemn scientists with their pants down, a project that delights his largely antiscientific audience." Worst of all, they seem to think, is Latour's "seductive charm."

That last accusation is unquestionably true. Charm is the first thing you notice about Latour. At forty-seven, in the rumpled serenity of his red turtleneck and corduroys, he is a tall man whose easy grin and merry eyes peering down a long face give him the look of a Gallic Jimminy Cricket; he has an air of being, as the French say, *bien dans sa peau*: at ease in his own skin. Born in the city of Beaune, in Burgundy, into a famous wine-growing family—its wine is bottled under the name Louis Latour—Latour is an epicurean through and through. He refuses to allow himself to be called a French intellectual, that term having been tainted, he says, by "fifty years of bad German influence on French academic writing." "My only ambition," he told an interviewer a couple of years ago, "is that people would say 'I read a Latour 1992' with

"My only ambition," Latour says, "is that people would say 'I read a Latour 1992' with the same pleasure as they would say 'I drank a Latour 1992.'"

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...that damned elusive

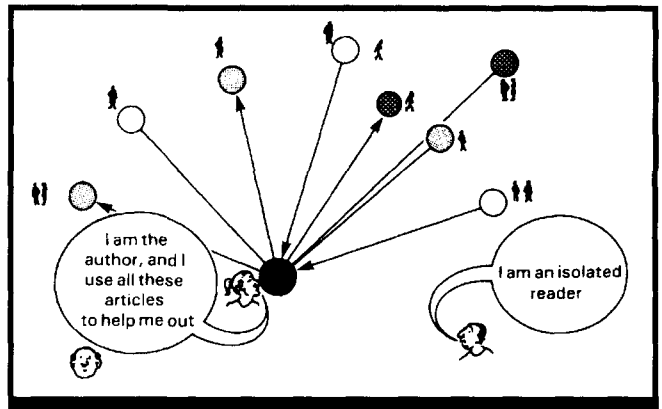
BRUNO LATOUR

the same pleasure as they would say 'I drank a Latour 1992.'"

After class, however, Latour's aristocratic poise frays a bit. He contemplates the fax with faint distaste, twirling a paper clip in his fingers. "Of course things are real," he says. "What do you call those things that make a car slow down? A speed bump. The British call them 'the sleeping policeman.' I like to say, 'the sleeping policeman is not a sign. The sleeping policeman will break your damn car.'"

But, he adds, "truth works by inscribing signs into things. I say, all right, yes, it's *true*. But that doesn't explain how it's *made*. Science and technology are constructed, as a house is constructed, of many different things. Science is interesting not because it is outside society but because it isn't."

The niceties of Latour's arguments have been missed before. Four years ago, a professorship at the prestigious Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton seemed such a sure thing that Latour gave notice at the Ecole des Mines and he and his wife, their son, and their daughter began house-hunting in New Jersey. Latour had been nominated by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Harold F. Linder Professor at the institute, and vigorously championed by other faculty members in the social sciences. Latour was pretty pleased about it, too. Institute appointments are famous not only for their salaries—the going rate, says one Princetonian, is 10 percent higher than the average salary elsewhere—but also for their lush offices, their ample support staff, and the complete freedom they offer to work as one pleases. "I was surprised they nominated me in the first place," Latour says. "It was a stamp of approval for the field."



Cartoon depicting the helplessness of the "isolated reader" before a scientist's arsenal of references. *(Science in Action)*

But then his dossier hit the desks of faculty members at the IAS's math and science schools. While nobody will speak in detail about what happened next, the outline is clear. All twenty-two members of the IAS's four schools—Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Historical Studies and Social Sciences—must approve a candidate for a full appointment. The scientists and mathematicians were infuriated, and—in a reversal that is extremely rare at this usually collegial institute—Latour's appointment either lost a faculty vote or never came to one.

Latour says he withdrew before a final vote could be taken, "because I knew I would embarrass the people who backed me. It took me months to get over it." The stories vary, but to judge by the number of unreturned phone calls, and refusals to comment, feelings are still bitter.

"It was my responsibility as a faculty member to learn a bit about the subject, and when I did I was appalled," says Frank Wilczek, a distinguished particle physicist who is a faculty member in the institute's School of Natural Sciences. Wilczek wouldn't discuss the Latour appointment specifically, but he was willing to talk about what he calls "this school of science studies."

"Roughly speaking," he says, "this school takes the techniques anthropologists have used to study preliterate cultures—going in without preconceptions and observing—and applies [these methods] to science. That is clearly inappropriate in the study of modern science. You can't make sense of the endeavor without reference to what it is about. It is a human endeavor and scientists have all the human motivations, but ultimately the test is a confrontation with reality."

Of course, plenty of academics take exception to work being done across campus in some field of which they vaguely disapprove. But the outrage scientists feel for science studies is fueled by more than intellectual disdain. Government and business are funding less basic research in science. Congress has voted to kill the superconducting supercollider. Doubts have been raised about the space station, even about the human-genome project. The turf is shrinking, and so, like tribes forced toward the same oasis by a drought, scientists and sociologists of science are starting to threaten and skirmish. Gieryn was in the audience at a recent opening of a Smithsonian exhibit on science in American life at which the keynote speaker—the chairman of the board of the American Chemical Society—decried all incursions of critical theory into the sciences, calling postmod-

"Of course things are real. [Take] speed bumps. The British call them 'sleeping policemen.' I like to say, 'The sleeping policeman is not a sign. The sleeping policeman will break your damn car.'"

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A Machine Dreams

The following has been adapted from *Aramis, or the love of technology* by Bruno Latour, translated by Catherine Porter, forthcoming from Harvard University Press. "Aramis" was a French fourteen-year effort to build an automated subway system made up of little cars, each unit so flexible it could speed passengers to their destinations without stops or transfers. The project stalled in the late 1980s. Latour's book—half fact, half detective fiction—investigates why. (All emphases in the original.)

Aramis speaks:

They are all gathered around the hors-d'oeuvres. I am becoming irresistible, they say. I move on, they move on to the act. They sign the acts. The die is cast. The checks are signed. The word is given. For fifteen years they've been meeting about me. Have they finally decided to make me? Now they're reassuring each other about my feasibility. They're all afraid, I sense that, but seeing themselves all together around me makes them feel braver. I am lying in the middle of the large circle they are making around me, these ministers, cabinet heads, municipal officials, public employees, and engineers large and small. At the center of this big circle, I am the deep well into which they are tossing their wishes, their hopes, and their curses. I exist if they agree, I die if they quarrel. Some love me assembled and rigid like a metro, others love me scattered, dispersed, experimental like a research project: how can I keep about me, in agreement about me, those who think that I am an unfeasible mobile, that I am still-born, that I am an idea from the past, an idea from the sixties, that I am, consubstantially, a failure, but from my erratic behavior one may draw interesting results, perhaps at least a variable reluctance motor, guidance software? . . . As if I were a motor, a casing, a program! A heap of separate parts! As if I existed only assembled. The "I" that humams receive at birth—that is precisely what has to be created for me. I am in a prebirth state. I do not yet have a body. The dismemberment humans encounter in the tomb is my condition even before the cradle. Reverse conception, which exists in fact only in Erewhon. The breath of life to which I aspire in order to make of my scattered members and my whitened bones a being that is not of reason—my soul—await your agreement, O you hors-d'oeuvres-eaters who all agree today to defer

❧

Fiction, the projection of a state of technology into the future, is part of an engineer's job. Engineers are novelists.

❧

my genesis until later. Indifferent to what you love. Rubicon-crossers who set up camp in the middle of the ford. Human beings contemptuous of things and thus contemptuous of yourselves.

❧

As accustomed as we have become to the idea of a science that "constructs," "fashions," or "produces" its objects, the fact still remains that, after all the controversies, the sciences seem to have discovered a world that came into being without men and without sciences. But no one would dare assert that the diesel engine "was always already *there, even before it was discovered." No one is a Platonist where technology is concerned.*

This rejection of Platonism affords the observer of machines greater freedom than the observer of facts. The big problems of realism and relativism do not bother him. He is free to study engineers who are creating fictions, since fiction, the projection of a state of technology from five or fifty years in the future to a time T, is part of their job. They are novelists. With just one difference: their projects, which are at first indistinguishable from novels, will gradually veer in one direction or another. Either they will remain projects in the file drawers (and their texts are often less amusing to read than novels) or else they will be transformed into objects.

In the beginning, there is no distinction between projects and objects. The two circulate from office to office in the form of paper, plans, departmental memos, speeches, scale models, and occasional synopses. Here we are in the realm of signs, language, texts. In the end, people, after they leave their offices, are the ones who circulate inside the object. A Copernican revolution. Aramis was a text; it came close to becoming, it nearly became, it might have become, an object, an institution, a means of transportation in Paris. In the archives, it turns back into a text, a technological fiction. The capacity of a text to weigh itself down with reality or, on the contrary, to lighten its load of reality, is what endows fictional technologies with a beauty that the novel we have inherited from the nineteenth century has difficulty manifesting nowadays.

❧

Document from the Automatisme and Technique company, 1969 or 1970:

Continuous transportation [elsewhere called kinematics] is the possibility of adapting later on to any evolution, no matter how unpredictable, of technology or of urban planning; in other words, it amounts to respect for the indeterminacy of the future. This safeguarding of the future has to be envisaged both on

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...that damned elusive

BRUNO LATOUR

ernism the "new nihilism" and warning that this intellectual contagion "is slowly moving out of the humanities and is now questioning the core beliefs of science."

But science studies seems unlikely to go away. What began as a movement inside the sociology department of the University of Edinburgh in the 1970s has gained a firm foothold on the American academy. The Society for the Social Studies of Science, founded in 1976, now has 650 members, according to Steve Fuller, who runs a program in social policy in the sociology department at the University of Durham in England and runs the Internet science-studies bulletin board. Science-studies programs, once forced to stay in the wings of engineering schools, are proliferating in American sociology and anthropology departments. UC-San Diego's science-studies program, which is supported by a grant of $2 million spread over five years from the National Science Foundation, is the best-known of the bunch, but there are others: Rensselaer, Cornell, MIT. Then there's the ultimate proof of a discipline having entered the corridors of power:

A Machine Dreams

the technological level and from the standpoint of serving constantly evolving metropolitan populations. On the technological level, it is important to stress that no hypothesis was made at the outset regarding the technologies to be used.

❧

"You see," my professor said, "it's more complicated than you think. . . . It's the opposite of an engineer's idea, it's an idea system, open to the unpredictable. No, no, we're off to a good start. A textbook case, my friend, a real textbook case. 'Respect for indeterminacy,' that's what we teach our students; to start from principles, needs, systems, and not from technology." Then, looking at his watch, he added, "We're going to be late for our meeting on the quai des Grands-Augustins."

We got off the bus, which was stuck in a traffic jam, and we studied the subway map, trying to calculate what route would involve the fewest transfers.

"Aramis ought to be making this calculation," I said.

"Exactly, and we wouldn't have to transfer at Châtelet. You see, my friend, Aramis really is an idea for travelers, not an engineer's idea. The one time they were actually thinking about us—and it didn't work."

"You mean, 'The one time they were thinking about our not having to think about anything,'" was my clever riposte.

"Engineers dream, but they're not crazy," my master replied primly, without acknowledging my cleverness. "What does the engineer produce, Mister O-So-Reasonable Young Engineer? A critique of the urban society of his time. Well? Does it surprise you that a 'kinematician' should get involved in making a whole movie script out of cars, happiness, and the future of civilization?"

❧

There are two major sociologies: one is classical, the other relativist or rather relationist. Only the second allows us to follow the realization or the derealization of technological projects.

Classical sociology knows more than its "actors": it sees right through them to the social structure or the destiny of which they are the patients. It can judge their behavior because it has fixed reference points with respect to which the patients behave in a pathological fashion. There are norms, and thus there are deviations with respect to the norm; there are reasons, and thus there is irrationality; there is logic, thus there is illogicality; there is common sense, and thus perverted senses. The judgments of classical sociology are above the fray; they are scientific; an abyss separates them from the interested interpretations of the patients obliged to perform the reality that the sociologists analyze. But aware of the countless contradictions entailed by its own existence situated at once above the fray and in the middle of it, at once inside society and outside it, classical sociology multiplies its methodological precautions, its hermeneutic circles, its retroactions, its marks of modesty. Obliged to reassure itself continually as to its own scientificity, it can be recognized by its jargon. For classical sociology, the world is an asylum of fools and traitors, of pretenders, of guilty consciences, and half-educated types. In this asylum, the sociologist is the director, the only one who has the right to go outside.

You can study anything with classical sociology—anything except the sciences and the technologies, anything except projects. They go too fast. They become too soft or too hard. To study them, you have to move from classical sociology to relativist sociology. Relativist sociology has no fixed reference points. It expects the actors to understand what they are and what it is. It does not know what society is composed of, and that is why it goes off to learn from others, from those who are constructing society. It adds its own interpretations to those of the actors whose fate it shares, often less felicitously than they. It seeks, too, to perform reality in order to keep its own version of the facts stabilized a little longer, and it confronts, fraternally, the contrary opinion of those it is studying. It has no strings to its bow but theirs, and it does not allow itself to throw "science" onto the scale in order to unbalance the equality between itself and its brothers with whom it is conversing. Without any knowledge other than what it gets from them, it is free at least from the crushing responsibility of being more scientific than the actors. No guilty conscience, no epistemology encumbers it, and thus no jargon. For relativist sociology, everything is grace.

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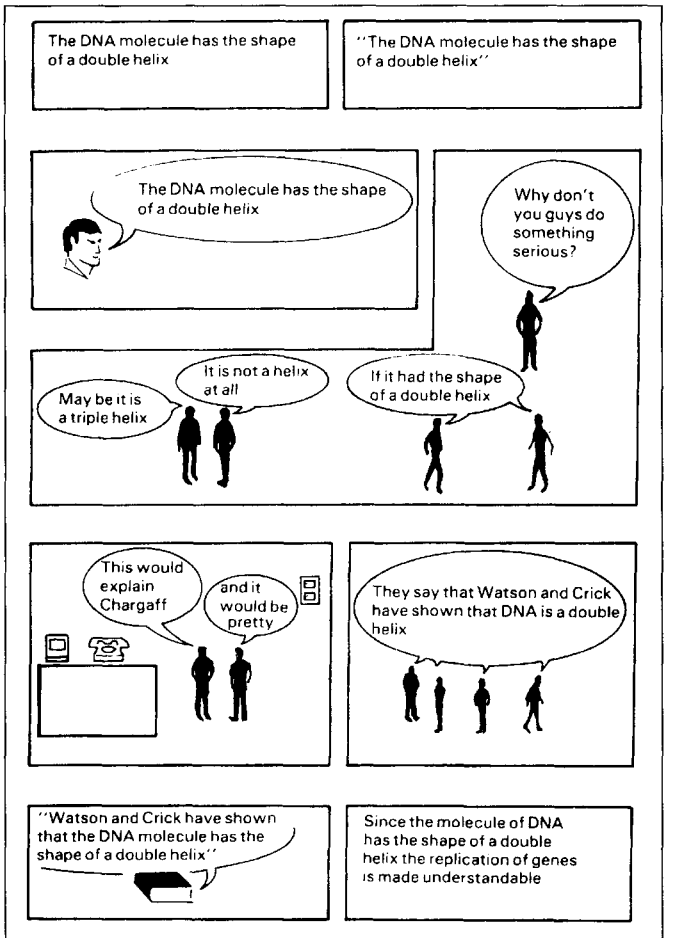
approval from Washington. This September, the National Science Foundation awarded a National Medal of Science for the first time to a sociologist, Robert K. Merton. Though he is far better liked by scientists than Latour is, Merton also studies their work from the outside.

Debates over constructivism—the assertion that knowledge is made, not simply discovered—undergird most thought in the humanities and social sciences of the past twenty years. Science, though, is a special case. The reputation of transcendental truth may be at an all-time low in the liberal arts, but science still gets away with talking about fact. Even students who dismiss the notion of a better or worse interpretation in English literature will cite scientific studies of acid rain as the basis for signing petitions and putting up banners.

Science-studies scholars put all that to one side. Wilczek is right—Latour does place scientists in the position usually occupied by Trobriand Islanders and other "native" peoples. Rejecting the more traditional history of science as something akin to military campaigns recounted by victorious generals, Latour studies, he says, what scientists really do. "For Latour, the Heart of Darkness is the solid-state-physics laboratory," grouse Gross and Levitt. Latour accords the scientific tribal belief system the respect one would accord any other *Weltanshauung*, but no more. In fact, he reflects, perhaps a bit less. "We can be tougher with scientists than with aborigines," he says. "Scientists are not used to opponents." And whereas historians of science are used to having their work evaluated by scientists, Latour argues that sociologists need not submit to such vetting. This is not to say he does not respect science, Latour says. But, he adds, a friend of his who studies baboons "has great respect for the baboons. But the baboons do not review her grant proposals."

Not that scientists still hold to the absolutist view that they climb inexorably from one truth to the next. Thomas Kuhn put that model to rest in 1962 with *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn's framework—in which science passes from one consistent and well-defended world-view, or paradigm, to the next—is familiar to anyone who has passed through an introductory philosophy or history of science course over the past thirty years. Kuhn was succeeded by more radical thinkers who stormed science's barricades with a kind of intellectual republicanism. The late UC-Berkeley philosopher Paul Feyerabend, for example, argued that creationism should also be taught along with evolutionary theory in the schools.

But none of these thinkers dislodged the conviction that science has a subject, which is nature, and that nature really exists "out there." Kuhn may have dispelled our wide-eyed faith in the selfless pursuit of truth by disinterested scientists, but he still considered the ultimate test of a theory to be how well it measured up against objective reality. Feyerabend argued for greater democracy among intellectual styles, but he never doubted there could be an account of nature that could be said to be true.


The DNA molecule has the shape of a double helix
"The DNA molecule has the shape of a double helix"
The DNA molecule has the shape of a double helix
Why don't you guys do something serious?
May be it is a triple helix
It is not a helix at all
If it had the shape of a double helix
This would explain Chargaff
and it would be pretty
They say that Watson and Crick have shown that DNA is a double helix
"Watson and Crick have shown that the DNA molecule has the shape of a double helix"
Since the molecule of DNA has the shape of a double helix the replication of genes is made understandable

Cartoon depicting Latourian analysis: the first panel contains a "textbook sentence," one "devoid of any trace of fabrication, construction, or ownership." Latour's analysis traces this "truth" back to its origins in controversy. He then exposes the social dynamics that lead to the closure of argument. Once the theory solidifies into hard truth, it is laid to rest in the "black box" of a journal or textbook. *(Science in Action)*

Latour doesn't address whether a theory is true or not. Frankly, he doesn't care. "To call a claim 'absurd' or knowledge 'accurate' has no more meaning than to call a smuggler trail 'illogical' and a freeway 'logical,' " Latour writes in his most famous work, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Harvard, 1987). "The only things we want to know about these sociological pathways is where they lead to, how many people go along them with what sort of vehicles, and how easy they are to travel; not if they are wrong or right."

What Latour is after is not only the epistemology of scientific inquiry but also the culture in which that inquiry takes place. Scientists generally shrug off as faddish nonsense much of what is embraced by their counterparts in the softer disciplines. Most scientists, if confronted with a philosophical objection, would bring up Leibniz's definition of a philosopher: someone who kicks up a lot of dust and then complains that he can't see. Most scientists would agree with Lewis

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...that damned elusive

BRUNO LATOUR

Wolpert, a professor of medical biology at University College in London, who, in a popular apologia called *The Unnatural Nature of Science* (Harvard, 1992), argues that science is a collection of rigorously-arrived-at truths that differ from common sense, in much the way that the knowledge that the earth spins is different from the common-sense language that refers to "the sun rising."

Latour and his followers make no such concessions to the separateness of science. For them, as Latour once said, even Feyerabend "is a Protestant, criticizing the religion from within." Fuller puts it this way: "There is this tradition from Karl Popper and the logical positivists through to Kuhn, which is that science is separate from the rest of society. In the late 1970's different people started pointing out that all the evidence for science as a rational, truth-seeking activity came from the scientists. And they began to argue that the laboratory is not all that different from other social organizations, like the factory floor or the tribe."

For many people in science studies, reading Latour was the intellectual bolt of lightning that knocked old habits of thought out of them. "The breakthrough book was *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*," says Fuller. Published in English by Sage in 1979, it is a case study of what scientists in a California laboratory "really do"—that is to say, what they're up to when they, for example, feed carefully prepared samples of chemicals, tissue and so on into "inscription devices" and take down what the devices say. "*Laboratory Life* convinced me that conventional philosophy of science is just rhetorical trappings, not what science is really about," Fuller says.

But again and again, Latour stresses that he *likes* science. He likes to remind me that he and his co-author, Steve Woolgar, got Jonas Salk to write an introduction to *Laboratory Life*. And, like scientists, he loathes the smug, self-important, "gotcha!" quality that characterizes much recent work about science in both the social sciences and the humanities. "Most of the literature, when it isn't boring, is debunking and cynical. It doesn't even believe in itself," he says.

What Latour dislikes most is the way sociologists and anthropologists tend to privilege certain social categories over other ones. For one thing, scientists have no trouble batting away such theories. "Somewhere, Durkheim remarks that even astronomy is actually the study of society," says Seth Lloyd, a physicist and complexity theorist at Los Alamos National Laboratory. "Well, that is as reductionist as the most hard-core physicist's claim that everything can be boiled down to just quarks and electrons."

"The social sciences have no 'out there' or 'up there' to serve as a foundation," Latour once told an interviewer. For that reason, Latour objects to feminist critics of science (who elevate gender to a transcendant principle), Marxist critics of science (who do the same with economics), and Foucauldian critics of science (who repeat the process with power). They, in turn, object to him. The British feminist epistemologist Hillary Rose, for instance, in a review of *Science in Action*, wrote: "By cutting himself adrift from those who point to the dominant interests which science serves and to the masculine composition of its workforce and its knowledge, [Latour] sidesteps the crucial challenge.... Unless feminism engages in a rather sharp struggle for social and conceptual space, both networks and analysis are likely to remain integral to masculinist hegemony."

One year ago, Latour resigned from a visiting professorship at the UC-San Diego science-studies program, in which he had been active since it was founded in 1989. The reason was not another donnybrook with scientists but the refusal of the sociology department to approve the interdisciplinary program's choice of sociologists. "The sociology department, which used to be good and which is now terribly bad, has overruled all of us [in science studies]," Latour writes by e-mail. "Instead of

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Like scientists, Latour loathes the smug, self-important, "gotcha!" quality that characterizes much work in the social sciences and humanities.

appointing [Latour's candidate] for the sociology of science slot in our program, they preferred to appoint nobody."

Latour also butts heads with scholars within science studies. Though he admires the much-praised *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer (Princeton, 1985), Latour criticizes the way its authors give precedence to social categories. A study of the disputes between the philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the physicist and chemist Robert Boyle, the book argues that the ideas of reliability and accuracy that prevailed in seventeenth-century British science derived not from experimentation in and out of the laboratory but from codes of gentlemanly conduct. Fine, says Latour, but we must be careful not to set up ideas of society and gentlemanly conduct—ideas themselves created by the special "laboratories" in which sociologists work—as absolute truths.

Many in Latour's field find this resistance to terra firma irritating. Fuller, for one, says, "Latour never wants to be forthright: should science be refereed by nonscientists? Should the public be more involved? How can you not ask these questions? The philosophy of science has to be reincarnated as policy. Should we be spending $9 billion dollars on a superconducting supercollider? The discipline has to have something to say."

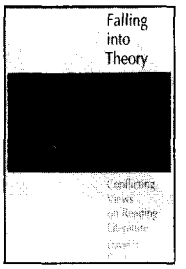
The charge of inconsequentiality teases the fiercely polemical Latour out of his shell of amiability. After I e-mail him a query about it, Latour replies: "I started this work to get rid of voluble, parasitic people like Fuller who have never done any field work and philosophize endlessly about giving political lessons which are taken seriously only by people on American campuses who have no political radical activity but who feel guilty about it and would like very much to be useful and practical."

All this puts Latour right where he wants to be: in the middle, assailed by left and by right, by scientists and by sociologists. Friends and adversaries alike describe him as evasive—half the trickster, half the little kid who says the emperor has no clothes. Of Gross and Levitt, Latour says, "They're fighting the modernist fight. But they choose me wrongly. Of course it's ridiculous to say it's all politics, all signs, or all gender. It is ironic, because the French postmodernists hate the stuff I do—I believe in objectivity, options, democracy. They see me as reactionary. They think I've gone back to naïve realism."

So what do scientists actually do? They create, and strive to extend, networks of human and nonhuman actors. "Scientists and engineers [are] constantly mobilizing large numbers of allies, evaluating their relative strength, reversing the balance of forces, trying out weak and strong associations," Latour writes.

For instance, the Louis Pasteur who emerges in Latour's *The Pasteurization of France* (Harvard, 1988)—a study of how Pasteur succeeded in winning over France to his germ theory of disease—is a thinker-politician, a skilled manipulator of the government and the press as well as a great researcher. *All* of his skills are important. "Pasteur went to blind wine tastings to demonstrate his theory of fermentation," Latour says. "That's not just showmanship. That's *why* he's such a good scientist."

This egalitarianism is reflected in a favorite Latourian word: "symmetry." To understand symmetry, consider, again, *The Pasteurization of France*. To say that Pasteur succeeded because his discovery was true about nature,



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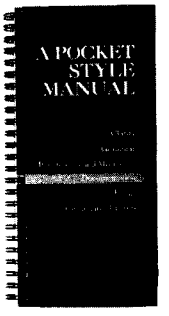

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...that damned elusive

BRUNO LATOUR

for instance, suggests that "nature," a realm neatly separated from society, can be used to explain the causes of activities within society—that once some discovery about "nature" is shown to be true, society rearranges itself to conform to this truth. According to Latour, this is asymmetrical, because it suggests that an understanding of nature is somehow more powerful, more dispositive, more fundamental, than an understanding of society. On the other hand, one might discard the idea of truth entirely and argue that Pasteur's success can be explained entirely through the lens of "society"—that, say, the hygienic regulations that stemmed from Pasteur's work were in fact enacted in order to give those in power a new way to control the lower classes. This explanation, Latour argues, is a mirror image of the first. Instead of saying that the truth of nature determines social arrangements, it says that social arrangements determine what is construed as nature's truth.

Both views are equally naïve, Latour says, because both proceed from the assumption that "nature" and "society" are somehow divisible. The symmetrical way to see Pasteur, Latour argues, is to see the split between nature and society as false. Thus, part of Pasteur's success was his alliance, in the social world, with hygienists, for whom he provided a good explanation of the diseases they fought. But part of his success was also his alliance, in the natural world, with the microbes themselves, for whom he became spokesman and interpreter. In other words, Latour rejects neither insight: not the insight into society nor the insight into nature. He simply claims that neither should be used to explain the other. It is a position of radical humility: pointing out an asymmetry does not require the pointer to stand on some higher theoretical ground. It's a gesture not unlike pointing out that a painting in a hallway is hanging crooked.

Before all this really makes sense, however, you have to understand Latour's most remarkable claim: that when you track the shifting alliances that scientists form as they go about producing scientific knowledge, you mustn't draw an impermeable line between human and nonhuman. In *Science in Action*, Latour introduces the concept of the "spokesman or spokeswoman," by which he means anyone who speaks for anything in the competition of networks: "Bill [a union representative], for instance, represents people who could talk, but who, in fact, cannot all talk at once. Davis [a scientist] represents neutrinos that cannot talk, in principle, but which are made to write, scribble and sign thanks to the device set up by Davis. So in practice, there is not much difference between people and things; they both need someone to talk for them." Latour would not deny that neutrinos "really" exist, he says. But that is not what interests him. He wants to know what social, political and cultural business the spokespeople are up to and how they attach the truth of neutrinoid existence to things such as the pages of textbooks, the agendas of Congressional committees, and the representations of the world that pass through art and popular culture. Given the intricacy of the web, he argues, it is impossible to say where truth-seeking

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> *"Postmodernism is a disappointed form of modernism," says Latour. "It shares with its enemy all its features but hope."*

ends and politics, or theology, begins.

In Latour's long rectangular office, papers pile up next to a Minitel, the French phone-computer that looks like a miniature PC. An assistant whom Latour pays himself works against the far wall on a first-generation Macintosh. Hanging from a push-pin is the motherboard of a personal computer, flecked like a bright green sea with the shiny ceramic colors of transistors, to which has been pasted a tiny reproduction of the fifteenth-century altarpiece of the cathedral of Beaune, painted by Roger van der Weyden. "I studied that painting from my earliest childhood," Latour says. "My father was curator of the art museum. I would look at it for hours."

The distinction between modern and postmodern—the distinction between modern and premodern, too—is among those that Latour would like to cast onto the ash heap of asymmetry. Latour says he learned early to see the past not as an oppressive weight to be thrown off, as it is in the modernist drama of progress, nor as a museum of now-meaningless fragments, as it sits in the postmodernist landscape, but merely as a part of the present. If there is one way Latour would like to be remembered, it is as a thinker who pointed the way out of the dead-end that is postmodernism.

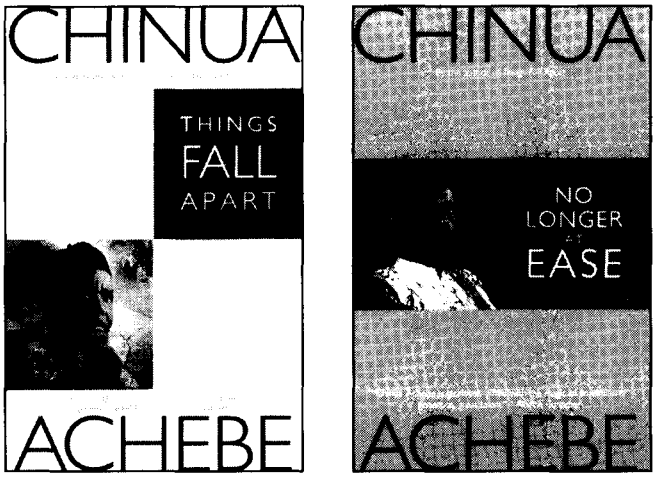
"Modernist time used to flow in an orderly manner," Latour wrote recently in an essay on "nonmodern" painting. "The past had to be subverted by new avant-gardes who would, years in advance, indicate to the ignorant public what to like and what to dislike. Each generation was as revolutionary as the former, hence the predictable order, hence the ever-resumed fight against the Philistines." Postmodernism broke with this tradition, he continues, "but postmodernism is still modernist to the core: its avant-gardes ridicule everything of the earlier generations, including the modernist dreams of revolutionary avant-gardes! It mocks itself to destruction." Because it preserves the same distinction-filled, category-ridden structure of thought, postmodernism, he writes elsewhere, "is a disappointed form of modernism. It shares with its enemy all its features but hope."

Still, you have to wonder, isn't his shifting elusiveness a sort of transcendent principle too? Doesn't Latour's souped-up empiricism descend from somewhere? Can it really be any freer than what he seeks to subvert? The language of his books and papers would seem to combine two streams of thought: one, hard-nosed and political, describing networks, constituencies, and spokespeople; the other, a philosophical apparatus of symmetries, objects, and quasi objects that certainly sounds like an offshoot of French semiotics.

"I share many stylistical elements with the postmoderns," Latour replies to this question. "The taste for style, the humor (although they prefer irony), but then the whole thrust is different.

"Chinua Achebe is one of the great intellectual and ethical figures of our times."

—Leon Botstein, President, Bard College



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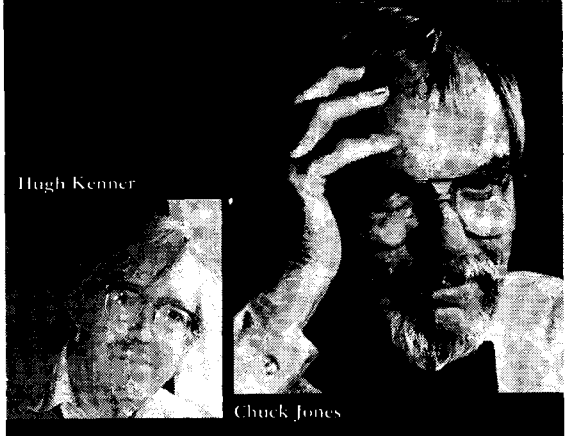

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...that damned elusive
BRUNO LATOUR

They love deconstruction, they are critical, they are for fragments and against united and systematic discourse, they have a conception of time that cites the dead past, they are above all in full and complete and absolute despair—that is the only absolute thing they have. I do not share any of those attitudes."

As for the notion that he portrays science as a savage war of all against all, Latour says: "The military metaphor is only a literary ploy to show that even in what was supposed to be reason, force is at work. It is a Spinozan and, if you wish, a Nietzschean ploy. To equate force and reason is a necessary preliminary tack to avoid the double language of those who have force on one hand and reason on the other. But it is not as in Nietzsche—for instance, a belief in a world really made of military forces. It is not a metalanguage. It is just that to bring those metaphors into the reality of pure peaceful science was *useful*. It had an effect, a refreshing and equalizing effect."

What might a nonpostmodern—indeed, a nonmodern—approach look like? Latour cites the book he considers his most successful: *Aramis, or the love of technology*, published in French in 1992 and due out in translation from Harvard University Press in the fall of 1995 [see "A Machine Dreams," p. 25]. Aramis was a fourteen-year attempt to build an automated subway system in Paris made up of little cars, each unit so flexible it could speed passengers to their individual destinations without stops or transfers. Aramis was supposedly crushed under the weight of its own bureaucratic inertia—it was an impractical plan for which there was no need but which no one would terminate until it simply died.

Latour, however, writes it as a kind of love story. Everybody fell in love with this neat, futuristic technology to a greater or lesser degree; the story of Aramis's failure is the story of the inconstancy of its lovers. In good Latourian fashion, among those given speaking

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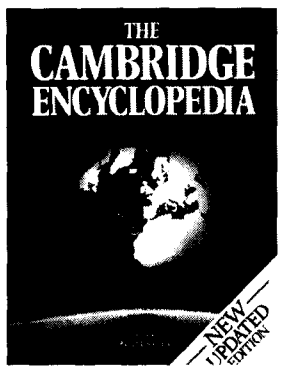

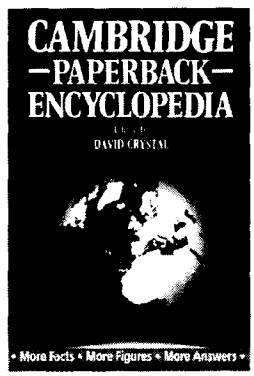

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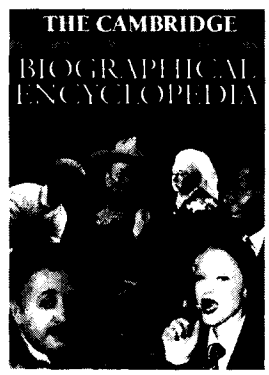

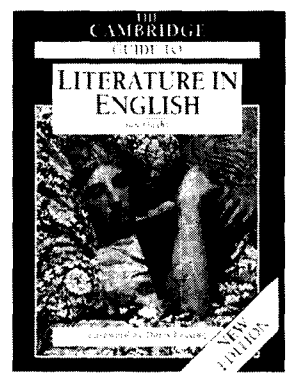

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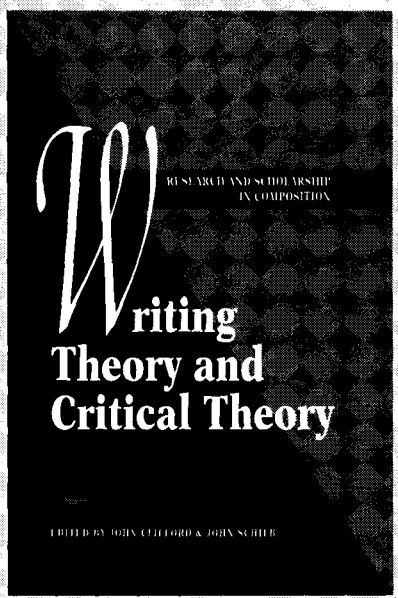

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PARABLE

PLATONATION

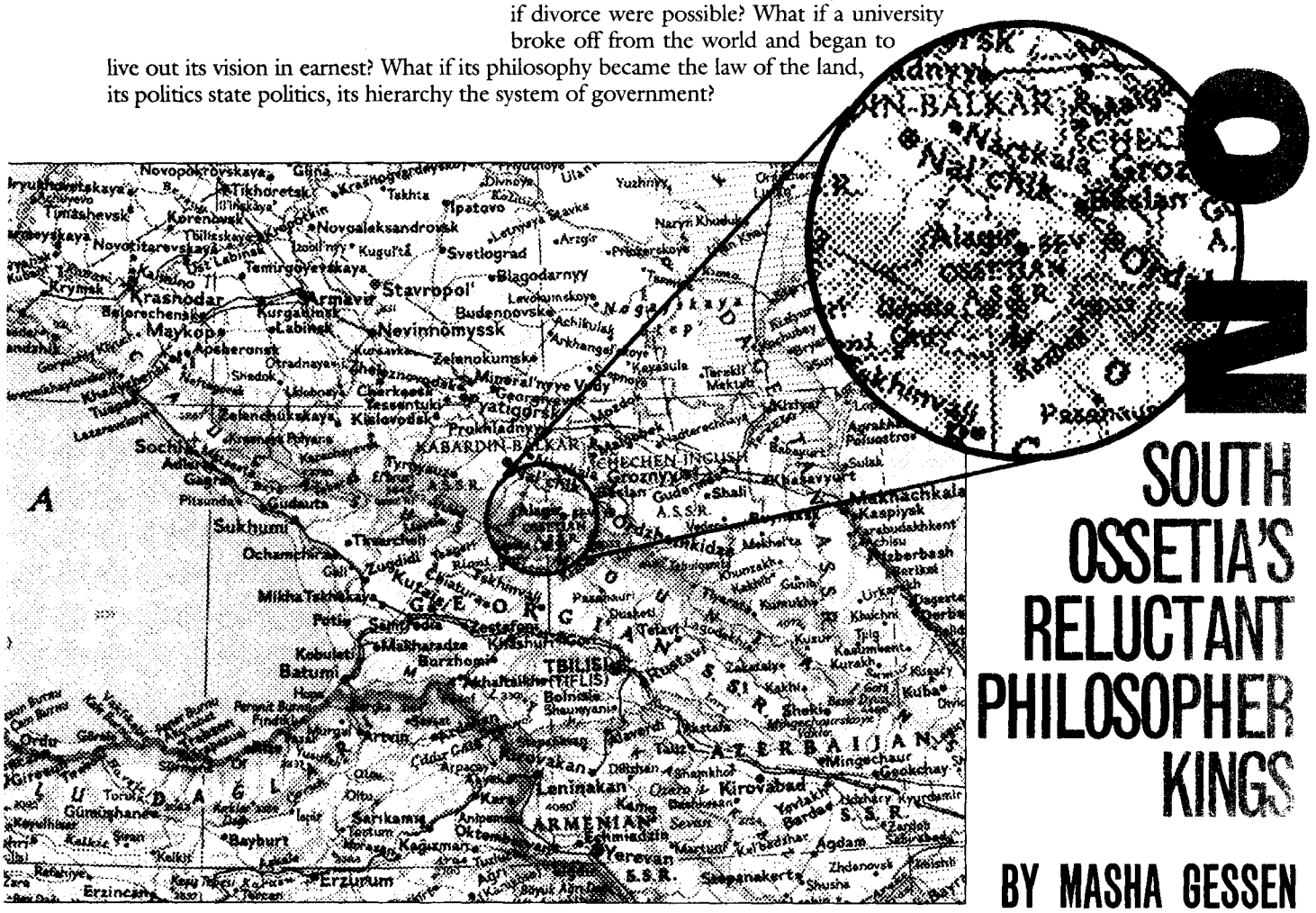
SOUTH OSSETIA'S RELUCTANT PHILOSOPHER KINGS

BY MASHA GESSEN

In building a city, they build not a city
but a monument to their own aloneness.

A land of hyperbole lies beneath them
as the sky of metaphors sails above us.
—Joseph Brodsky, "Verbs"

The university is a world apart, with its own philosophy, its own politics and its own hierarchies. Even in the Soviet Union, where universities were the locus classicus of ideological rigidity, they were still the only place you could nurse a lingering utopianism, a quixotic faith in the perfectibility of things. Of course, this combination of insularity and idealism is bound to be irritating, and academia's relationship with the rest of the world is correspondingly tense, based, like a bad marriage, on misunderstanding and the impossibility of a break. But what if divorce were possible? What if a university broke off from the world and began to live out its vision in earnest? What if its philosophy became the law of the land, its politics state politics, its hierarchy the system of government?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PLATO NATION

In a land far away, under the bright sun in the Caucasus mountains, there is a sleepy place called South Ossetia that has about as many people in it as a big college town, that has fought a bloody war to draw a line between itself and the outside world, and that has turned to its academic leaders to take it to statehood. The university rector, a historian, is now the head of state. A philosopher is in charge of writing laws. A mathematician is mapping foreign policy. The lines between theory and practice have dissolved in the heat of an open-ended adventure in which history is learned in the streets, political science mastered in government offices, economics grasped on the bread line, and philosophy battled out in Parliament. It is an appealing idea, this experiment in Plato's Republic–style government, but for those who would see it as a road map to utopia, it has not, alas, lived up to its promise.

South Ossetian soldiers being trained to use a Kalashnikov. (Photo by S. Mashinsky)

Perched at the northern edge of Georgia, pressed up tight against the Russian border, South Ossetia has had the sort of long and embattled history that breeds wounded pride and uncompromising patriotism. The Ossetians trace their roots in Europe to the first century, a time before there was a Georgia or a Russia, when a Farsi-speaking tribe called the Alans, who would later become known as the Ossetians, clustered in and around the Caucasus mountains. Through the centuries of war and occupation that followed, the Ossetians migrated to the North Caucasus and split into two nations: North Ossetia, which was incorporated into Russia, and South Ossetia, which became a part of Georgia. In 1801, when Georgia joined the Russian Empire, the two halves were reunited. In 1922, Ossetia formally became two separate jurisdictions: the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic, within Russia, and the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, within the Soviet Republic of Georgia. South Ossetia's 1,510 square miles—it is larger than Rhode Island but smaller than Delaware—contain a single city, Tskhinvali, and several small towns and villages that dot the Ossetian Military Highway, whose mountainous beauty was made famous by a number of Russian and Ossetian poets. The highway runs across the Caucasus mountains to the Russian-Georgian border, where North Ossetia begins.

Like many non-Russian peoples, the South Ossetians led a less-than-idyllic existence under the Soviets. Life could have been worse: they could have been forced off their land, the way a neighboring people, the Chechens, were. But between 1934 and 1956, the South Ossetians were subjected to ideological "cleansing" an extraordinary six times. And each time, in classic Stalinist fashion, it was the intelligentsia, keepers of the national tradition and pride, who were singled out for execution, imprisonment, or exile.

Each time, though, South Ossetia's intelligentsia managed to regenerate themselves, thanks to the Soviet system for maintaining at least an appearance of cultural diversity. Like other so-called autonomous regions, South Ossetia was granted the trappings of limited independence: a local governing body, a teachers college, a research institute specializing in South Ossetian culture and history, and admission quotas to the main Russian universities. In its heyday, the research institute employed about 350 scholars, who studied South Ossetia's extraordinarily long recorded history and carefully wrote their way around such troublesome subjects as Stalin's purges. But it was the teachers college, though as poorly equipped and little respected by outsiders as other provincial institutions, that provided a focal point for the region's patriotism. A history of the institution, published on its fiftieth anniversary, in 1982, begins with a quote from a Tskhinvali elder: "When passing the building of the teachers college, every resident of South Ossetia must bow to it as to a temple."

By the 1980s, every third resident of South Ossetia had been educated at the teachers college. One quarter of Tskhinvali's peacetime population of 50,000 (the entire country had only 100,000 inhabitants, of whom 70,000 were ethnic Ossetians) consisted of students, teachers at the college or the South Ossetian branch of the State Polytechnic Institute, and staffers at the research institute. The city also boasted more than 200 members of the Soviet Union's exclusive writers, artists, and composers unions. The education priv-

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The university rector, a historian, is now the head of state. A philosopher is in charge of writing laws. A mathematician is mapping foreign policy.

ileges enjoyed by South Ossetians were not unique, but the percentage of residents benefiting from them was unusually high. Most people in Tskhinvali, it seemed, had an advanced degree—or several.

In 1990, as the Soviet Union neared collapse and nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power in Georgia, South Ossetians began to perceive a threat to their limited independence. When the rhetoric glorifying "Georgia for the Georgians" reached its most militaristic pitch, the South Ossetians declared their region a republic, renamed their teachers college a university, elected a parliament, and prepared for war. They were led by a group of young nationalist intellectuals very close in spirit to the other philosopher statesmen who emerged throughout the former Soviet bloc in the late 1980s; their army was made up of teachers college students who sold their cars and other prized possessions and imported all the submachine guns and grenade launchers their rubles could buy. In January 1991, Georgia sent in what it claims were police troops and what South Ossetians say were gangs of nationalist hoodlums. Whatever they were, the Georgians encountered a partially armed force of students led by teachers and artists. War broke out, each side claiming that the other fired the opening shot. In twenty days, using the university as "a bastion, a Bastille, of sorts," says sixty-one-year-old rector-cum-president Ludvig Chibirov, the South Ossetians forced the Georgian troops out of Tskhinvali and onto the mountains that ring the city. The Georgians retaliated by shelling Tskhinvali and subjecting it to sniper fire for much of the following eighteen months. In July 1992, after more than 500 South Ossetians had died, a peacekeeping force of Russian, Georgian, and South Ossetian troops entered the city to enforce a cease-fire.

Since then, the South Ossetians have lived somewhere between war and peace, statehood and dependence. South Ossetia, which considers itself a republic, is officially recognized only by other breakaway regions. Georgia—South Ossetia's legal guardian—largely ignores the place, both in its rhetoric and in its budgeting. In the resulting vacuum, with their clocks and watches inexplicably but consistently five minutes behind, the South Ossetians are mourning their dead, patching up their houses, holding elections, and trying to figure out what lessons can be drawn from their academic quasi revolution.

HISTORY

"I never thought I'd see history firsthand," confesses the polyester-clad former biology teacher I know only as Tolik. In his capacity as director of the Information Ministry's press center, Tolik has the unenviable task of leading me around Tskhinvali under the scorching late-May sun. He falls quiet, hanging his balding head as he considers the distinctly unglamorous spectacle that history has turned out to be. Neither their leaders' knowledge of history nor the South Ossetians' love for it—this is a place where kiosks stock Herodotus (who mentions the Ossetians' ancestors) alongside cans of beer—has prepared them for the untidy ways it behaves once it leaves the page.

Mostly it seems to have struck out wildly for the future, then come limping back to the past. With the outbreak of war, tragedy descended on South Ossetia in triplicate, leaving a trail of debris behind. The start of the fighting was followed by an earthquake during which two snow-covered mountains collided, dumping enough excess snow into the narrow mountain rivers to create a devastating flood. Though the war was almost entirely limited to Tskhinvali, today most of South Ossetia has been destroyed by one force majeure or another. In some places, the only structures left standing are the ones built to last forever: monuments to communist leaders. Java, for instance, which used to be the second-largest town in South Ossetia, is now a dusty moonscape of old foundations punctuated by a protruding head of Lenin here or of Stalin there, impaled on giant granite columns.

In a spacious office in Tskhinvali's Parliament building—it is pockmarked from shelling, charred from an unrelated fire last November, and damp from the resulting water damage—Fatima Pukhayeva, an old Communist Party hand, an extraordinarily imposing woman, and the person in charge of the South Ossetian educational system for the last fourteen years (she is now its minister), enthusiastically imparts to me her vision of South Ossetian history. "We had ideology," she booms. "We thought that somebody, somewhere, was building communism. Somebody, somewhere, was thinking of us, so we were socially secure. We didn't participate in it personally."

As the Soviet sys-

South Ossetia's opposition newspaper

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tem fell apart, the South Ossetians embraced political participation with the zeal of the newly liberated, voting into office the group of young nationalist democrats—artists, mathematicians, and teachers—who had been preparing them for war. "And then look—the end of the world. Natural disaster and war, all together," says Pukhayeva. "We had a sharp reorientation of values. Abstract values fell away, and only one value remained: life."

Life did become more difficult. Between acts of war and acts of God, Tskhinvali was left without gas, electricity, or running water. Bread lines were measured in days. The city filled with women wearing black in mourning for sons and husbands. The suffocating safety of the pre-*perestroika* era, known as the Period of Stagnation, acquired a new appeal. "Nostalgia" is the word most Tskhinvalis use to explain what happened next. Disillusioned with the reformers, who were in their twenties and early thirties, the South Ossetians voted them out of office in March 1993, turning to a group of older and—they hoped—wiser leaders. Some feel like traitors for having voted their stomachs. "I realize this is bad," says Natalya Sanakoyeva, an English instructor at the university. "But I want back into Stagnation because for me it was a good and comfortable place."

Margaret Mitchell is very popular right now," says Pukhayeva. "Probably because everything she spoke about is happening here."

In a land that has one library for every 600 people, things are often best explained by way of literary analogies. "Margaret Mitchell is very popular right now," explains Pukhayeva, who moonlights as an English instructor in the university's history department. "Probably because everything that she writes about is happening here. We have our own Scarlett, who can see that the world is collapsing and needs to be saved, but without further horror."

South Ossetia's Scarlett turns out to be the revered Chibirov, who last September eschewed intellectual prima-donnishness and deigned to become head of state. A muscular man who speaks slowly, wears shirts a bit too tight, and looks at the world with the clear blue eyes of a newborn Ossetian baby, he gives off an air of innocence that would be disarming even if he were not the leader of a warring nation.

He was the first of the second wave of South Ossetian politicians. When South Ossetia returned to a previous generation of leaders, it did not turn away from its intelligentsia. This time, though, the electorate banked on establishment figures, choosing seventeen Communist Party members from among the nation's top administrators and researchers. These quickly created a united front, resurrecting the party on what Uruzmag Dzhioyev, a thirty-two-year-old mathematics instructor and separatist radical who had served as South Ossetia's foreign minister for the previous two years, calls "a fog of promises"—a platform of a kinder, gentler future with light, heat, running water, and food at Soviet prices. Among the seventeen were four generations of university rectors: Chibirov's predecessor, Pavel Doguzov; Chibirov; his successor, Yuri Gagloyti, who now heads the research institute; and the current rector, Georgy Dzhioyev (not related to Uruzmag Dzhioyev).

Pukhayeva has more confidence than Uruzmag Dzhioyev in the party members. "The people who have come now, they carry more experience in the knowledge of human history," she states. Not only are several of them historians, but Chibirov wrote the history of the teachers college and edited the South Ossetian history textbook used by local schools. Pukhayeva's brother Konstantin Pukhayev, another newly minted politician, authored several of its chapters. "So they will not allow destruction," continues Pukhayeva in the same tone of confidence in which she no doubt used to speak of the bright communist future. "They are not politicians, but they know a lot, they are well read, they know what happens in the world, and for this reason they will lead us in step with the world. I think the optimal option for internal politics is a person who knows the essence of humanity, who understands human psychology, who knows how humanity has acted, be it in the time of the Romans or when states were collapsing like this."

POLITICAL SCIENCE

They may know what people did while Rome burned, but does this mean they know how to govern? Pukhayeva's faith in Soviet-academician-style historian kings is boundless. "I am not a chicken," she says, stating the obvious. "I have never laid an egg, but I know how it's done."

Other South Ossetian officials, however, are realizing that governing demands skills that studying government doesn't necessarily teach you. Batradz Kharebov, a deputy minister of information and possibly the least outgoing person in this traditionally hospitable southern land—his job may be public relations, but he answers questions in monosyllables and looks past me absentmindedly—worries that his work "requires certain qualifications, maybe even certain connections, to know what people we should seek contact with, whom we can trust with information, whom we can get information from quickly." A former staff member at the research institute with a Ph.D. in economic history, the 44-year-old Kharebov seems most comfortable communicating in writing or not at all. "I had to train on the go," he says. "I have to have contact with a lot of different people. I've had to learn the basics. I had to learn to talk on the phone."

If it's so painful, why does he bother? "There was nobody else who could do this," he replies. And therein lies one of South Ossetia's great national puzzles. If Viacheslav Gobozov, a med-

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ical student–turned–Parliament member, is to be believed, during the March elections South Ossetia distinguished itself from the rest of the world in a whole new way: it had more aspiring politicians per capita than any other country in the world. In his television show, *Bolevaya Tochka* (The Source of Pain—an apt name for a local news-analysis program), Gobozov reported that one out of every hundred voters sought a seat in Parliament. This remarkable statistic notwithstanding, the latest crop of officeholders demonstrate remarkable unity on the subject of how they got their jobs. Chibirov was "literally forced to become chair of the Supreme Soviet," he says, having demurred twice before being elected unanimously (which does mean that he voted for himself). Pukhayev, Chibirov's forty-two-year-old coauthor, who has a Ph.D. in South Ossetian history of the Soviet period and is now deputy chairman of the Soviet of Ministers, was drafted by Chibirov. "He and I have a long-standing relationship," says Pukhayev. "He is a historian, and I am a historian. So when he was looking for assistants, he chose me. I was stubborn, refused for a long time. I had stayed away from power structures because I had long since determined that research would be my main direction in socially beneficial work." Kosta Dzugayev, one of South Ossetia's most impressive politicians and a deputy rector, started in government as Chibirov's press secretary. And though this tall, dark, and handsome thirty-eight-year-old with a disconcerting habit of speaking not merely in complete sentences but in well-rounded speeches would seem a natural-born politician, he, too, had to be pushed into the field. "By the nature of my convictions," he declaims, "I am—well, I fear appearing immodest—but I am really a philosopher. I ended up in politics because it could not be any other way. To be here and not participate would have been treason. My many friends and colleagues would not have put up with it." Atsamas Kabisov, a bearded 34-year-old painter who serves as Chibirov's deputy for defense, is notable only for his economy of expression as he articulates what is apparently the national sentiment: "Somebody had to do it. And Rodin once said that an artist must be a citizen first."

Security minister Col. Viacheslav Bagayev, a lifelong military man, is one of the few who question this show of demureness, as well as the qualifications of those who profess it: "Just because you want to do good for your people doesn't mean you should dive head first into something you know nothing about. A person who wants to build a state should at least know something about economics and legislation."

Which the new South Ossetian politicians don't. Of the thirty-five sitting members of Parliament, not one is a lawyer, and only one is an economist, the former chairwoman of the university's economics department. "So far the work of Parliament has been limited to shifting around personnel," complains Uruzmag Dzhioyev. There is little evidence of other activity, save for education reform. In the middle of my week in South Ossetia, most members of Parliament disappear, their staff explaining that they've gone to North Ossetia on

South Ossetian elders. (Photo by S. Mashinsky)

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PLATONATION

government business. The truthful Chibirov tells me that that day the capital of North Ossetia is hosting the opening of a conference on Ossetian studies, which he—and many of his colleagues in the academy and the Parliament—simply could not miss. In the two months following the elections, the Parliament met only once. "You'd think everything was fine in Athens," Uruzmag Dzhioyev comments caustically. The presidium of Parliament, made up of the ministers and committee heads, meets more frequently. But evidence of state-building activity is scarce. On the agenda for the presidium meeting that falls during my stay in South Ossetia are discussion of a South Ossetian state award and a report back on one politician's trip to Moscow in search of further financial aid.

When I ask members what the Parliament does, they tell me about committees. "On every committee, we've got professionals," says Georgy Dzhioyev. "We, for example," he continues, nodding toward former rector Pavel Doguzov and Anatoly Kabarayev, chairman of the university's philosophy department, "sit on the committee on science, education, and culture. There is a committee on economics—that's where the economists sit. Then we have, say, a committee on legislation. That's where lawyers sit. So they just work things out and we approve them." Of course, there is only one economist and no lawyers. Dzugayev, who heads the committee on legislation, is openly resentful that he didn't get to chair the committee on education, where the action is. That committee is working on education reform, the Parliament's favorite child. When the committee finishes its work, South Ossetian children will have specialized education for the last two years of secondary school, the better to prepare them for college.

One day, most members of Parliament simply disappear. Their staff says they've gone to North Ossetia on business. Chibirov explains that actually, they've gone to a conference on Ossetian studies.

Though the party-member scholars may be dilettantes at politics, they are old pros at politicking. The mix of government and academic intrigue is a lethal brew. According to Uruzmag Dzhioyev, when noncommunist political activists responded to the resurrection of the Communist Party by organizing their own Party of National Unity, two of the latter's founders, employees of the research institute,

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received reprimands for poor attendance from institute director Yuri Gagloyti, who was shortly thereafter elected to Parliament on the Communist Party ticket. (Gagloyti dodged my efforts to schedule an interview.) Another young scholar-politician, Evelina Gagloyeva, was removed as chair of the university's economics department after she objected strenuously to the return of the Communist Party. (Proving the tactic effective, Gagloyeva refused to speak to me, passing through a colleague the message that she was "fed up with the whole thing.")

In the Soviet Union, the academy may have included dissenters, but scholarship was strictly a single-truth institution. To Chibirov, that still seems the natural order of things. "My line in Parliament is that there is no Communist Party and there are no other parties—there is only the all-Ossetian party, which has to defend the interests of the Ossetian people," he says. "There are individuals within Parliament and outside of it who do not share the main positions of the government, but they do not talk about it openly."

And when, after two days of interviews with Communist Party representatives, I ask Kharebov—whose boss, the minister of information, is secretary-general of the Communist Party—to put me in touch with some opposition politicians, he responds with a flat and unself-conscious, "We don't have an opposition." Pressed on this point, he gets defensive, saying the opposition has left town, that if I want to talk to it, I am on my own, and that the opposition paper has shut down. When I insist that there is an opposition, he does what any Soviet professor would have done: he shuts me out, refusing to talk to me for the rest of the week.

"He overreacts," my polyester-clad companion, whose role now seems to have switched to tracking rather than guiding me, sorrowfully notes. "Opposition is a painful subject." So painful that in one case Kharebov personally calls a woman I have planned to interview to cancel an appointment I have scheduled with her. The crudeness of such behavior is almost charming: training as he goes, Kharebov is a politician who has not yet learned that information control must be imperceptible to be effective.

Chibirov's big strategy is to get the soldier-children off the street. With that goal in mind, the South Ossetian university has decided to hike the number of incoming freshmen.

SOCIOLOGY

Civil war, Chibirov says in his authoritative historian's voice, is the scariest kind of war there is, because of the havoc it wreaks on the national psyche. One unintended consequence of the recent elections is that in this land, where elders always had the final word and teachers were equated with saints, the younger generation has begun to view its former teachers with contempt. Tskhinvali society is now divided along several crisscrossing lines of suspicion: the young versus the old, those who fought in the war versus those who didn't, the nationalist democrats versus the Communists, and those who are patriotic versus those who are presumed to work for the Georgians. The result is an explosive setup in which the former warriors, who still dominate the security forces, have no respect for the teachers who have been elected to be their commanders.

I get my first glimpses of the anarchy that is everyday South Ossetian life when I peek through the bullet holes in the curtains of the apartment where I am staying, when I stare down the barrel of a gun pointed at me by a group of young men cruising Tskhinvali in a car, and when I listen to the nightly postcurfew gunfire that, metaphorically speaking, drowns out the elected voices of reason.

"It's very hard to work here," says Ibragim Arifi, director of the all-volunteer independent television station, Ir. "You are judged with a submachine gun." The most recent crop of politi-

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cians also learned this quickly. "[They] think they are very important," says Znaur Gassiyev, first deputy chairman of Parliament, who, at seventy, might be the oldest Communist Party hand in the land (though, being a good South Ossetian, he did time in his youth as a history teacher before going into a career in the party). "At the first session, they all sat together. Pavel [Doguzov], the former rector, next to the new rector, and they thought that now they'd get to work and everything would be in order. They got burned right away. They even got shot at." One night in April, someone opened fire first on the house of university rector Georgy Dzhioyev and then on the house of research-institute director Gagloyti.

The unfinished complex—meant to house the university and its dormitories—is the largest structure in Tskhinvali, a steel carcass filled with the darting shadows of young men who use it as a shooting range.

Then, says Georgy Dzhioyev, he got a call, presumably from an opposition supporter, saying, "Keep working as rector. We respect you. Teach our children, but leave politics alone." Though Dzhioyev says that kind of threat can't drive him out of politics, Chibirov says that Dzhioyev did attempt to resign his Parliament seat after the shooting. As for Gagloyti, Tskhinvalis in the know say he has stopped going to government meetings. (On the other hand, virtually every non-Communist I meet seems convinced that the shootings were staged to raise the pair's political profile. Security minister Bagayev even suggests that the incidents were an attempt to settle an old score—say, by a student who had been made to pay a bribe to enter the university.)

And then there are the students who fought in the war. They do nothing to disguise their disgust with the current leadership—or anyone else who has not fought in a war (even though many of them have returned to the university, where they take classes from these very elders). These young men, who for the most part are armed and unemployed, have taken to shooting at politicians they don't like—as well as at one another—at an alarming rate, and are in turn becoming targets for the police.

In the past year, more than twenty young South Ossetians, including the deputy defense minister and the head of the police special forces (both of whom had come from the ranks of young warriors), died of gunshot wounds. In the summer of 1993, police executed fifteen members of a gang of soldiers-turned-robbers, spawning rumors that somebody somewhere "knew too much." Each death led to tense standoffs among the city's various armed groupings, but in every case, tensions miraculously died down after a few days.

A red-faced and red-bearded military commander with three university degrees (in medicine, geology, and engineering) who will allow me to refer to him only as Alexander the Great will not talk to me unless I prove I can handle a Kalashnikov. After putting me through three hours of shooting practice and concluding that I am an able shot, Alexander feels free to ruminate on the fate of the land. His is a politics based on the certainty of violence: casting a despairing look over the city from the mountain we used as a shooting range, Alexander says that as long as a single nonwarrior remains in government, South Ossetia will likely be sold to Georgia and "a period of terror, civil war, and so on" will begin. The dominant conspiracy theory is that a secret deal involving Russia, Georgia, and South Ossetia will be cut and that the South Ossetians will be forced to dis-

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arm. Why would the South Ossetian politicians agree to such a self-defeating proposal? Because, the theory goes, when Georgians occupied the city in January 1991, they confiscated the archives of the local KGB, which meant that anyone in government could be subject to blackmail and is thus a potential traitor.

The leadership's academic lineage provides further fodder for conspiracy-theorizing. The educational institutions here reported to the Ministry of Education in Georgia, which in turn reported to Moscow. Opposition members believe that the decades-old habit that the scholars-turned-ministers have of relying on Moscow and Tblisi not only for classroom furniture but for the party line in whatever discipline they happen to teach—history, economics, literature, even math—has made them, well, resistant to the opposition's radical-secessionist dreams.

In fact, the possibility of "a period of terror, civil war, and so on" seems palpable without any effort on the part of Georgia or Russia. So far, Chibirov's efforts to forestall this outcome have been limited to the tactics of the university teacher. He meets with groups of young men—meetings that he says contain "many unpleasantnesses"—and has asked North Ossetian authorities to grant South Ossetian young men noncompetitive admission to institutions of higher learning there. The point is to get the armed soldier-children off the streets. With the same goal in mind, the South Ossetian university has decided to hike the number of incoming freshmen.

"And what kind of conditions are they going to set—that everyone who is accepted into the university has to surrender his machine gun?" asks Bagayev, the security minister, laughing. "In that case we could open two universities and the war would end. The war is not over. It will be over when we are recognized as a country. That's when we'll solve the arms problem."

The front page of an issue of the opposition newspaper, *Ard,* opens with a crude drawing of a heavily armed young man and a skeptical-looking gentleman with a briefcase, separated by a dotted line on the ground. The young soldier's side is marked "South Ossetia"; the gentleman's, "The Rest of the World." The caption on the gentleman's side reads, "The World Community: 'Somehow, I don't recognize you, dear.'" The caption on the other side reads, "South Ossetia: 'That's a good omen—means I'll be rich.'" (Ironically, the bit of folk wisdom the cartoon alludes to—that anyone who goes unrecognized by an acquaintance will soon come into money—is Russian.)

Desperate times call for defiant humor. But when I meet the publishers of the paper—Alan Kachmazov and Inga Kochiyeva, a young married couple—their mood is far less hopeful than

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the cartoon would suggest. They talk of ever-worsening economic conditions, bitterly listing the latest bloopers of the administration, their former teachers. They pump me thirstily for news of journalist friends in Moscow, complaining of their growing isolation. Though they are among the most visible members of the radical-secessionist opposition, they cannot hide their desperation in the face of South Ossetia's failing stab at statehood.

Life isn't as bad as it was right after the war, but it is still brutal. Water service was never restored—every house and apartment in Tskhinvali has a bathtub filled with cold well water—but after living without lights for more than two years, Tskhinvalis finally secured electricity by stretching wires out their apartment windows to a large shed; from there the wires cross the Russian border into North Ossetia. South Ossetians have gas, although, being unable to tap into the Russian supply of natural gas, they have to rely on Georgia for it—and the Georgians seem to enjoy playing practical jokes with gas. There was no gas throughout the cold winter, but in the spring it was turned on with such a vengeance that attempts to light the stove are now either futile—the force of the gas blows out the match—or likely to set the kitchen on fire. Pensioners and state employees, including all politicians and academics, have not been paid since Chibirov took office in September 1993. In an attempt to stave off mass hunger, the city handed out small plots of land to residents so they could plant vegetable gardens. South Ossetians now tend their gardens every day after lunch, departing their workplaces en masse to do so.

On the hill at the end of the street on which Kachmazov and Kochiyeva live—Soviet Street, known as Death Street during the shelling because it was targeted from every direction—stands an unfinished new building complex that would have housed the university and its dormitories. It is the largest structure in Tskhinvali, as grand and unfinished a project as the South Ossetian experiment in independence, a steel carcass filled with the darting shadows of young men who now use it as a shooting range.

The old university building, a pink neoclassical structure in the center of town, is now decorated with a wall of photographs: eighty students who were killed in the war. Though it is a source of particular pride around Tskhinvali that the university did not close for a single day during the fighting, students say that the academic learning process ceased when the war began. "You can imagine that after the war, we have nothing left," says Georgy Dzhioyev. "The equipment is all gone. Everything has been destroyed or stolen."

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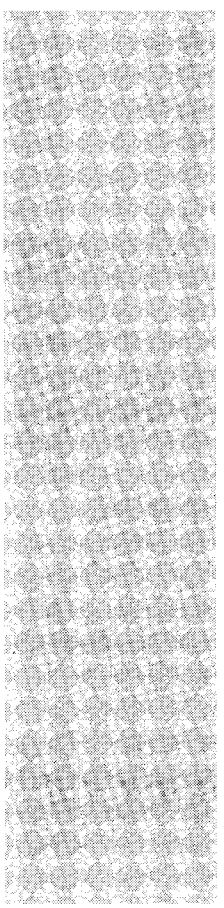

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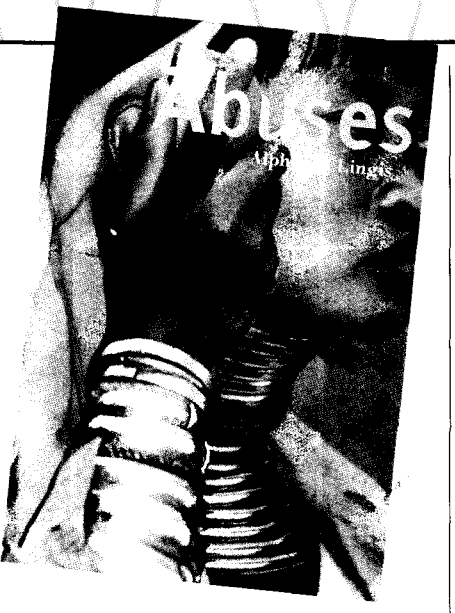

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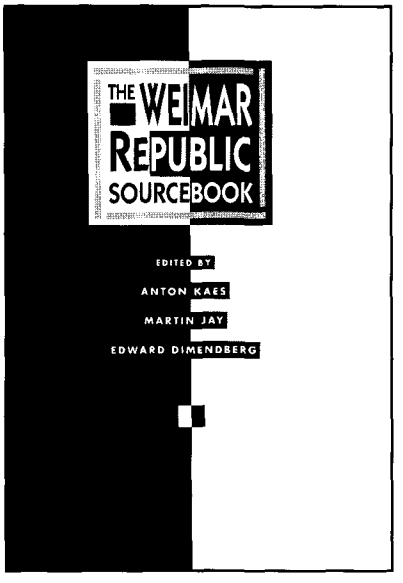

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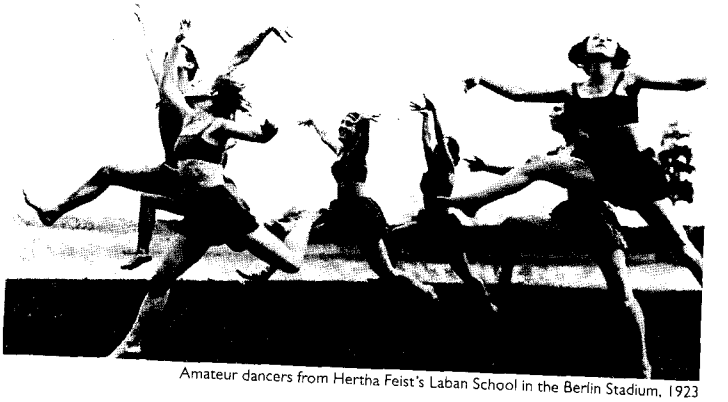
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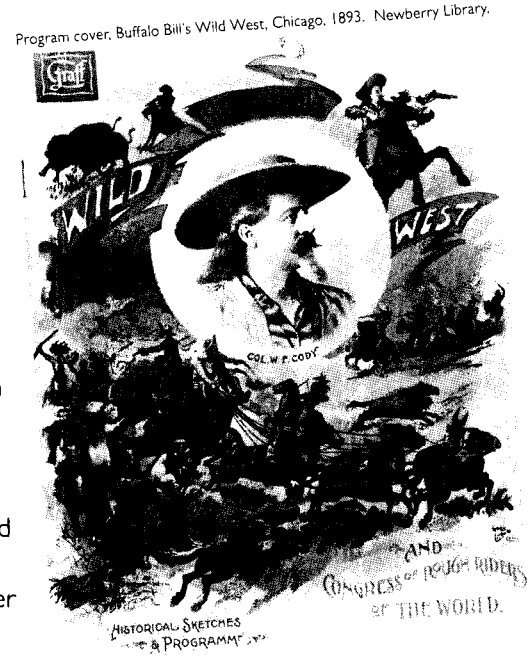
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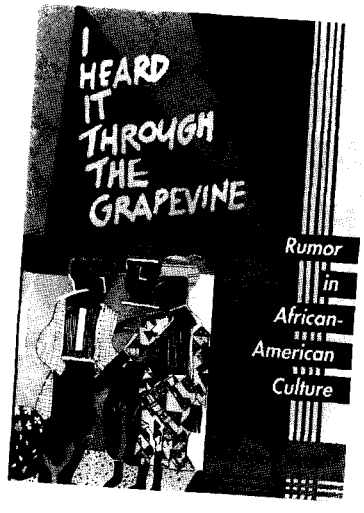

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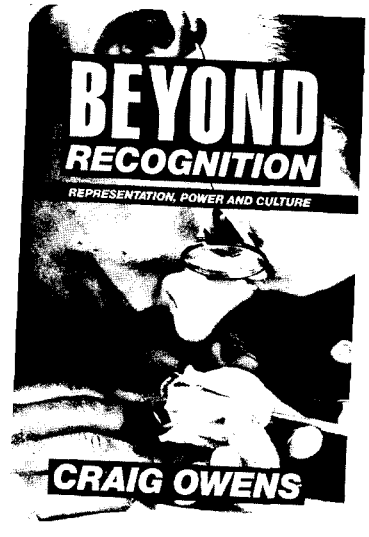

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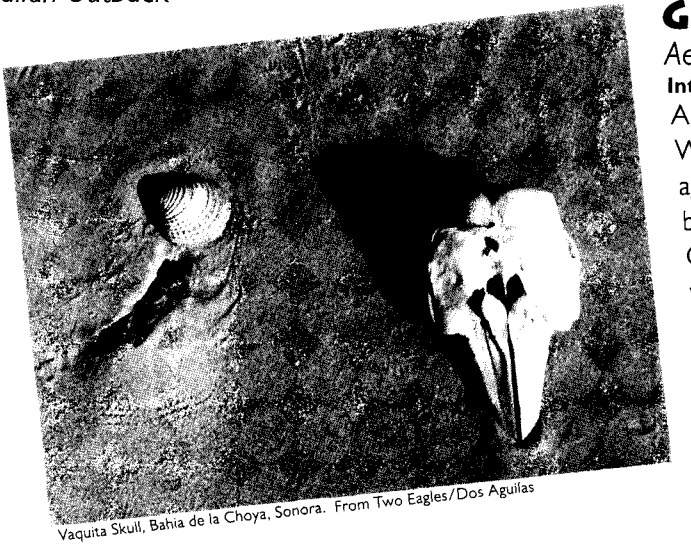
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Meanwhile, the scholar-politicians harp on and on about their burning desire to leave politics and return to the university. Chibirov, who was made rector emeritus when he became head of state, notes with satisfaction, "The university's doors aren't closed to me yet." Dzugayev, Kharebov, and Pukhayev say they can't wait to resume their research—and to build on their experiment in governing in their study of history and philosophy.

"I have some interesting thoughts on the development of national, spiritual, and world-view nucleus," explains Dzugayev. "The Ossetians, in this respect, represent an interesting object of study. The ethical constants that were maintained in our society for centuries are taking on new shapes under new conditions, thus influencing the development of the ethnicity as a whole."

Two of the two strongest "ethical constants" in South Ossetian culture were the traditional respect for elders and teachers and the value placed on education. Now that teachers have stepped into an area where unsuccessful experiments are not merely the basis for further study and where faulty theories can contribute to war and destruction, they have lost much of their status. Education, it turns out, hasn't really helped either of the opposing parties rule better, or come up with a new way around the admittedly gruesome set of Hobson's choices facing everybody in former Soviet territories. Alexander the Great leaves me with an aphorism and an interpretation whose less-than-flawless logic seems somehow indigenous to this Caucasian land. "We have a saying," he says slowly, as he slips the magazine almost imperceptibly in and out of his Kalashnikov. "You can make a policeman out of a person, but you can't make a person out of a policeman. So, better to be a good person than a bad politician." That may be the last and most important of the lessons of South Ossetia.

Masha Gessen is a Moscow-based journalist. She wrote "Reaching the Critical Masses: George Soros Sets Off a Popperian Explosion" for the May/June 1994 issue of Lingua Franca.

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THEIR DAYS ARE NUMBERED

The last great unsolved mathematical conundrums and the obsessives who love them

BY JIM HOLT

IN 1637 A MAGISTRATE IN TOULOUSE JOTTED down a simple-sounding proposition in the margin of a book. Let us call this proposition *q*. Several centuries later, in 1954, a guy in Japan framed a very different manner of proposition. Let us call it *p*. Then, in 1985, a West German raised the marvelous and wholly unexpected possibility that *p* might logically entail *q*. A few years later, a fellow in Berkeley showed that this entailment—which in the meantime had been refined by a clever Parisian—indeed held. Finally, in June, 1993, the son of an English theologian, lecturing before a small audience at Cambridge, sketched a purported demonstration that *p* was true.

"Oh," he added, "and by the way, *q*."

There was jubilation. Immediately, word that *q* had been shown to be true was propagated around the world by e-mail. The next day the news was headlined on the front page of *The New York Times*.

Last December, though, another set of e-mail messages went out announcing the detection of a snag in the alleged proof of *p*. So maybe not *q* after all. And there the matter stands.

The odd thing about this spatio-temporally diffuse set of events is that *q* is not really very important in itself. Originally the idle surmise of a mathematical dilettante, it has no known consequences of any moment, either practical or theoretical. Yet under the appellation "Fermat's last theorem" it has long been the most celebrated piece of unfinished business in mathematics.

At this writing, the aforementioned Englishman, Andrew Wiles, is in seclusion in the attic of his home in Princeton, New Jersey, trying to resuscitate his proof. The majority opinion among mathematicians who are familiar with the byzantine structure of Wiles's argument is that he will eventually succeed, although it may take him a couple of years (rather than the couple of months he initially anticipated when the defect was identified). But there are skeptics—which is hardly surprising, given the long history of abortive proofs of Fermat's last theorem by leading mathematicians. The most recent false alarm sounded in 1988, when the Japanese number theorist Yoichi Miyaoka claimed to have demonstrated that the theorem was a logical consequence of an already proved theorem in the remote field of differential geometry. The proof he outlined seemed cogent enough at first blush. Newspaper headlines blazoned that the hoary

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problem had at last been dispatched. Within a week, however, mathematicians had descried several defects in Miyaoka's logic, one of which looked to be fatal. And so it was.

The failure of Miyaoka's proof marked the end of what had been the go-go eighties for mathematics—a decade in which it appeared that all the field's perennial conundrums were finally going to be put paid to. The era was heralded in 1976, when a pair of University of Illinois mathematicians managed to affix a (somewhat controversial) QED to the "four-color conjecture"—a source of puzzlement for well over a century. Then, in 1980, the discovery of a queer mathematical entity known as "the Monster" consummated a decades-long international quest to taxonomize all "finite simple groups"—the basic building blocks in abstract algebra. In 1983, a mathematician at the University of Maryland, working in tandem with a colleague at Brown, solved the "class number problem," which had originally been posed by the great Karl Friedrich Gauss in 1801. In 1984, the so-called Bieberbach conjecture, dating from early in this century, succumbed to proof at the hands of a Purdue analyst. In 1985, a West German number theorist proved a sort of weakened version of Fermat's last theorem—the first real advance on the problem in a hundred years. And in the next few years, would-be demonstrations of the three most celebrated conjectures of all—Poincaré's conjecture, the Riemann zeta hypothesis, and Fermat's last theorem itself—were adduced by practitioners in a variety of nations. Young mathematicians despaired that there would be no heroic feats left for them to perform.

They needn't have: the last three proofs collapsed. (The author of the would-be Riemann proof handled the miscarriage with aplomb by going on to publish a history of failed attempts to prove the famous hypothesis.) And besides, several persistently mysterious propositions from the theory of numbers remained, including the notorious Goldbach conjecture. Thus, today's mathematicians are left with a quartet of classic unresolved conjectures to test their mettle against: Riemann, Goldbach, Poincaré, and—pace Mr. Wiles—Fermat.

What makes these four conjectures so tantalizing? For one thing, they are all easy to state and understand, unlike the hopelessly arcane propositions that most contemporary mathematicians have truck with. There is, moreover, an air of strangeness about them, a baffling quality. In three of the four cases, at least, it is far from obvious why the conjectures should be true, if true they are. The grounds on which they were originally hazarded remain mysterious. Finally, though, it is their recalcitrance to proof that distinguishes this classical quartet from the vast number of other profound hypotheses that mathematicians have grappled with over the centuries. The Poincaré conjecture was formulated 90 years ago; the Riemann zeta hypothesis has been around for 135 years; the Goldbach conjecture is more than 250 years old; and Fermat's last theorem is more than a century older still. All four have been subjected to the most subtle and penetrating investigations by the most illustrious minds. The elaborateness of the mathematical machinery brought to bear against them seems almost comical considering the modesty of the propositions themselves.

Fermat's last theorem asserts that the equation $x^n + y^n = z^n$ has no whole-number solutions when the exponent n is greater than 2. As even the biggest mathematical philistine must know by now, this conjecture originated with a marginalis that Pierre de Fermat (1601–65) penned in his Latin translation of Diophantus's *Arithmetica* next to a problem about finding squares that are sums of two other squares (e.g., $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$). "On the other hand," Fermat wrote, "it is impossible for a cube to be the sum of two cubes, a fourth power to be the sum of two fourth powers, or in general for any number that is a power greater than the second to be the sum of two like powers." To which he puckishly added, "I have assuredly discovered a truly marvelous demonstration of this proposition which this margin is too narrow to contain." (Cf. a graffito spotted several years ago in Manhattan's Eighth Street BMT subway station: Fermat's last theorem with the addendum, "I have discovered a truly marvelous proof, but I can't write it now because my train is coming." Suspiciously, Harold Edwards, author of the 1977 study *Fermat's Last Theorem,* has an office around the corner from the station, at NYU's Courant Institute of Mathematics.)

Fermat was almost certainly mistaken—not in his assertion that the proposition was true, but in his belief that he had found a proof for it. In all likelihood he was able to demonstrate that it held in the special case of $n = 4$ (which is easily accomplished by a neat trick Fermat invented called the "method of infinite descent"), and then hastily concluded that the argument could be generalized to all exponents. Nevertheless, in deference to his claim to have found a proof, the conjecture has become known as a "theorem." It is called Fermat's last theorem not because its author died after conceiving it—indeed, he had another three mathematically active decades remaining in his life—but because by the beginning of the nineteenth century the rest of his many conjectures had either been proved or

The failure of Miyaoka's proof marked the end of what had been the go-go Eighties for mathematics.

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refuted; this was the last open one. (Since open theorem is a contradiction in terms, "Fermat's last theorem" is not only a double misnomer but an implicit oxymoron.)

Goldbach's conjecture is even more elementary than Fermat's last theorem. It says that every even number can be expressed as the sum of two prime numbers. (Thus, for example, the even number 24 can be written as the sum of 13 and 11, each of which is prime because it has no divisors other than itself and 1.) This amusing little conjecture first appeared in a letter that Christian Goldbach (1690–1764)—a Prussian mathematical enthusiast of no particular distinction who served as tutor to Peter II, the teenage czar of Russia—sent to Leonhard Euler in 1742. Although Euler, one of the greatest mathematicians of all time (and certainly one of the most productive), was inclined to agree with his correspondent's guess, he avowed that, notwithstanding its apparent straightforwardness, he hadn't the slightest idea how to go about demonstrating that it was true.

Attempts to prove the conjecture were largely unproductive until in 1931 the Soviet mathematician L. Schnirelmann showed that every even number can be written as the sum of not more than 300,000 primes. Yet this result seems risible compared with Goldbach's original surmise that only two primes are required. A decade later, another Soviet, Ivan Vinogradov, got the number of primes needed (for "sufficiently large" even numbers, at least) down to four—a feat for which Stalin rewarded him with a prize of 100,000 rubles. More recently, an episode of *L.A. Law* featured a mathematician who, caught in a sticky divorce case, yielded to his wife (also a mathematician) a manuscript containing . . . a complete proof of Goldbach's conjecture! Unfortunately, the television series was canceled before the details of the proof could be divulged.

The Riemann zeta hypothesis was first formulated in a brief paper published in 1859 by the incomparable German mathematician Bernhard Riemann (1826–66). It concerns an infinite series called the "zeta function," which was first studied by Euler in the eighteenth century. Relying on his aesthetic intuition, together with some slight computational evidence, Riemann hypothesized that all of the "zeros" of the zeta function—that is, the values for which the function vanishes—lie on a certain "critical line" in the complex plane.

Unlike the Fermat and Goldbach conjectures, which concern the domain of natural numbers (0, 1, 2, . . .), the Riemann hypothesis belongs to complex analysis, the field of mathematics that extends the methods of calculus to "imaginary numbers"—those including that scarcely conceivable item, the square root of -1. To get to this ethereal realm from the humble natural numbers, one must ascend through many numerical orders: the integers, the rationals, the irrationals, the transcendentals. (Historically, this ascent took longer than two millennia.) As it happens, though, a proof

A Sampler Of Less Famous Unsolved Problems In Mathematics

Despite their apparent simplicity, the following questions have stumped mathematicians for centuries.

1. **Are there infinitely many twin primes?** Twin primes are pairs of primes that differ by two, such as 3 and 5, or 17 and 19, or indeed 1,000,000,009,649 and 1,000,000,009,651.

2. **Are there infinitely many perfect numbers?** A perfect number is one whose proper divisors add up to the number itself. Thus 6 is a perfect number, since its proper divisors are 1, 2, and 3, which add up to 6. So is 28 (1+2+4+7+14), not to mention 33,550,336.

3. **Are there any odd perfect numbers?** If there are, the smallest, it has been shown, must be larger than 10^{100} (which is 1 followed by a hundred zeros, vulgarly known as a "google"). There is a whole theory about this class of numbers, which may be nonexistent.

4. **Is π/e a rational number?** Both π and e (Euler's constant, approximately equal to 2.72) are known to be irrational, but no one knows what numerical species results when you divide one by the other.

5. Finally, there is the annoying **$3n + 1$ problem**, which is actually only a few decades old, but is no less vexing for that. Choose any positive whole number. If the number is even, divide it by 2. If it is odd, multiply it by 3 and add 1. Iterate the process. Will you eventually arrive at 1, regardless of which number you started with? Looks simple; no one has a clue. As Paul Erdös has commented, "Mathematics is not yet ready for such problems."

—J.H.

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of the Riemann hypothesis would have profound consequences for natural numbers as well. This is strange and astonishing. It is as if some finding in, say, genetics were to reach all the way down to the theory of gravity. It is such unexpectedly intimate links between seemingly distant regions of mathematics that make most mathematicians Platonists in their heart of hearts. Mathematical entities must exist independently of us; for, in the words of British mathematician Roger Penrose, they "give us a great deal more than we originally bargained for."

While Fermat's last theorem is probably the most famous unresolved problem in mathematics, the Riemann zeta hypothesis is, in the near-unanimous judgment of mathematicians, the most important. No doubt that explains why the Cambridge mathematician G.H. Hardy, as he was about to embark on a ferry crossing from Scandinavia to England in especially turbulent weather, sent a postcard to a fellow mathematician bearing the inscription: "Have proved the Riemann hypothesis. Yours, Hardy." How, he thought, could a just God possibly allow him to perish at sea with the unmerited distinction of having proved such a momentous result?

This same Hardy made the first substantial step toward disposing of the problem, by proving in 1914 that an infinity of the zeta function's zeros fall on the desired line—which leaves open, of course, the possibility that infinitely many others do not. Today, ingenious computer programs have shown that the first 1.5 billion zeros of the zeta function satisfy Riemann's hypothesis without exception. But from the Platonic point of view, this finite number is not even a drop in the bucket.

"Some proofs command assent, others evoke delight and an overwhelming desire to say, 'amen, amen.'"

Poincaré's conjecture is second in importance to Riemann's. It pertains to that rubbery generalization of geometry known as topology, which deals with the properties of things that remain invariant when they are schmooshed in every imaginable way. The conjecture was advanced in 1904 by the Frenchman Jules-Henri Poincaré (1854–1912), the last mathematician to have a truly universal grasp of the subject. Poincaré hypothesized that, topologically speaking, if something *looks* and *acts* like a ball, then it must *be* a ball. (Or, to put it more properly: every simply connected, closed n-dimensional manifold that has the Betti numbers and torsion coefficients of the n-sphere is homeomorphic to the n-sphere.) If true, this claim would resolve all sorts of outstanding questions about the different forms that space can take—looped, curved, knotted, twisted.

Impressive headway has been made on this one. In 1960, in the midst of the so-called golden era of manifold topology, a U.S. mathematician named Stephen Smale proved that the conjecture held in all dimensions from five upward. (Smale went on to organize, with Jerry Rubin, "Vietnam Day" against the Vietnam War.) Twenty years later, another American topologist, Michael Freedman, succeeded in proving it in four-dimensional space. So the only kind of space in which we are not quite sure of what is and what is not a sphere is three-dimensional space—the kind we're intimately familiar with. Weirdly enough, this turns out to be the most arduous case of all.

WHAT KEEPS THESE FOUR CONJECTURES FROM getting converted into theorems? Producing theorems is, after all, what mathematicians do. Their collective output, published in some 1,500 journals in a hundred languages, has been estimated at 200,000 theorems per year. Of course, not every one of these is necessarily the breakthrough, first proof of a conjecture. Mathematicians don't stop when they have proved a theorem once: they try to find another, better proof, one that is more concise and free of drudgery, more economical in its means, more arresting in its logic; one that throws a different sort of light on why the theorem is true; one that is, in a word, more beautiful. (There is even an "original proofs" school, analogous to the "original instruments" movement in music, which strives to construct proofs of conjectures using only the techniques available at the time the proofs were conceived.) It could be argued that a theorem's meaning, as opposed to its reference, lies in all the possible proofs that might be discovered for it, each of which relates the theorem to a different constellation of mathematical ideas. "Some proofs command assent," declared the English mathematician Lord Rayleigh. "Others woo and charm the intellect; they evoke delight and an overwhelming desire to say, 'amen, amen.'" The itinerant Hungarian savant Paul Erdös likes to say that God has a book containing the most perfect proof of every theorem; when Erdös claps eyes on a really good proof, he is wont to praise the author by pronouncing it "straight from the Book."

So what is it a mathematician is doing when he (there aren't many women) sets out to construct a proof? In theory, the idea is to come up with a sequence of logical inferences leading from the appropriate axioms and previously proved propositions to the conjecture. Which axioms are appropriate depends on the area of mathematics the conjecture belongs to: conjectures about the natural numbers make

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up number theory (the useful, reckoning part of which is known as arithmetic); those about the continuum (real numbers) make up analysis; those about groups, rings, and fields make up abstract algebra; and so on, and each of these areas is built on a set of axioms. Number theory, for example, is based on the five "Peano axioms."

But this picture represents an ideal of rigor that is seldom attained in practice. For most of the history of mathematics, standards of reasoning have been shockingly slapdash. The deductive proof from explicit axioms fell out of fashion not long after Euclid, and was not really revived until the late nineteenth century. In the interim, mathematicians tended to base their arguments loosely on physical intuition and much fiddling around with formulas. The real geniuses among them had a knack for reaching sound conclusions through hair-raisingly fallacious methods. It is worth noting that perhaps the most extraordinary pure mathematician of the present century, the self-taught Indian wonder Srinivasa Ramanujan, had scarcely any idea what a proof was, in the judgment of his discoverer G. H. Hardy, yet he obtained some of the most beautiful and profound results in all of number theory. Ramanujan placed more trust in the Hindu goddesses who vouchsafed number-theoretic truths to him in dreams than in the plodding methods of logic.

In contemporary mathematics, though, the usual enemy of rigor is not goddesses but prolixity. As proofs get longer and longer, their exposition tends to get sketchier and sketchier, and the risk of hidden error increases accordingly. Andrew Wiles's purported Fermat proof was 200 pages just in outline; with all the minutiae filled in it would be five times as long. The current record-holder for sheer length is the proof of the theorem that classifies all finite simple groups, which runs to 15,000 pages. (Michael Aschbacher, one of the more than a hundred mathematicians who contributed to this proof, has estimated that the probability of its containing an error is close to one, but that the probability that such an error couldn't be corrected if discovered is close to zero.) Mathematicians, being somewhat lazier than the ruck of humanity, are understandably loath to spend weeks and months checking the details of their colleagues' proofs. Thus, the literature is rife with false assumptions and inferences.

What's more, even among experts there are differences of opinion as to whether a given proof holds water. An extreme case is the 1976 proof of the four-color conjecture by Kenneth Appel and Wolfgang Haken of the University of Illinois. Next to Fermat's last theorem, the four-color conjecture had been the most famous unproved claim in mathematics. First put forward in 1852 by an Englishman named Francis Guthrie after he had finished coloring in a map showing the counties of England, it states that four colors suffice to distinguish the regions on any possible map (even one with gerrymandered congressional districts).

There was enormous excitement when it was announced that this conjecture had finally been proved. The mood was somewhat dampened, however, when it was understood how Appel and Haken had proceeded. What they did, in essence, was identify all the categories of map for which the conjecture might fail to hold and then use IBM mainframes to test this huge number of possible counterexamples—a task impossible to accomplish by hand. Four years of fierce work and 1,200 hours of computer time yielded a proof, but one that no human mathematician will ever be able to verify. Since it cannot be known with any certainty whether the computer program devised by Appel and Haken actually performed as they intended it to—mightn't it contain a bug?—there remains an aura of inconclusiveness about the whole enterprise. What was most disappointing about the four-color proof, though, was its bulldozerlike unloveliness. There were, to be sure, ingenious bits in the Appel-Haken argument. Yet its overall logic—enumeration of (thousands and thousands of) cases—held little aesthetic appeal for most mathematicians. "I assume the proof is true," commented Paul Erdös. "However, it's not beautiful. I'd prefer to see a proof that gives insight into *why* four colors are sufficient."

Even if the entire cosmos could be turned into a computer, it might not be powerful enough to refute Fermat's last theorem.

Perhaps one day such a proof of the four-color theorem will be found. But while some conjectures are so fertile as to spawn any number of beautiful and gloriously redundant proofs, others may turn out not to be provable at all. Take Fermat's last theorem. By the beginning of this decade the conjecture had been demonstrated to hold for all values of n up to four million. Furthermore, applying an important result from the nineteenth century, one can show that any possible counterinstance must perforce involve numbers greater than four million raised to the four millionth power. Even if the entire cosmos could be turned into a computer, it might not be powerful enough to perform the calculation necessary to refute Fermat's last theorem. So the conjecture is "true" for all numbers that will ever be accessible to us (or any other civilization in the universe). Yet this constitutes zero percent of

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the full infinity of natural numbers—an infinity that may well harbor infinitely many trios of numbers that belie Fermat's last theorem.

In a celebrated speech at the Second International Conference of Mathematicians, held in Paris in 1900, the versatile German mathematical master David Hilbert read a list of what he considered to be the greatest thitherto unsolved problems in mathematics, and stirringly gave voice to his conviction that every one of them could be settled by the methods of logic. "In mathematics," Hilbert announced, "there is no ignorabimus." But thirty years later, a Viennese logician named Kurt Gödel stunned the mathematical world by proving Hilbert to be quite mistaken. Gödel's "incompleteness theorem" showed that no formal system could capture all the truths of arithmetic. In other words, there will always be propositions in mathematics that, though true, are not susceptible to proof. Gödel's discovery raised suspicions that the perennially irresoluble conjectures of mathematics might be among these "undecidable" propositions. If so, then no matter how assiduously mathematicians strove to prove them, no matter how cunning they were in their assaults, defeat was logically inevitable. The effort would be as futile as trying to square the circle—a famous challenge from antiquity that was revealed to be impossible in the nineteenth century.

The classic conjectures are not quite kinky enough to achieve self-reference—to say "I am not provable."

The popularizer Martin Gardner used to say he believed and hoped that Fermat's last theorem was Gödel-undecidable. But, curiously, if the Fermat conjecture could be shown to be undecidable, this would be tantamount to proving it true. For if it were false, that would mean there was a trio of numbers *a*, *b*, *c* that solved the Fermat equation for some exponent greater than 2. But the very existence of these numbers would constitute a disproof

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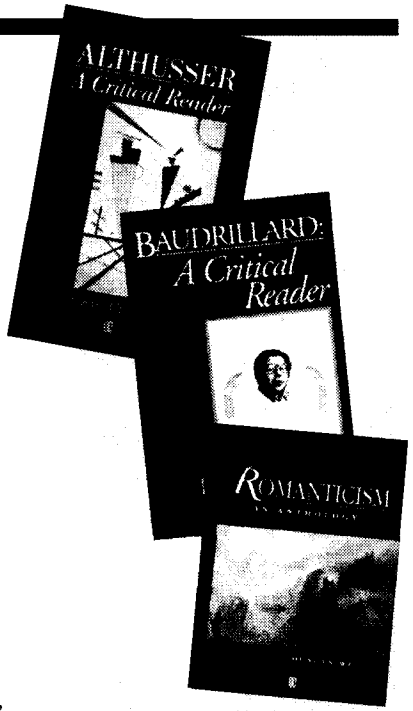

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of Fermat's last theorem—which, of course, would contradict the assumption that it was undecidable.

To date, several propositions in number theory have been shown to be undecidable in Gödel's sense. Yet they possess none of the simplicity of the Fermat or Goldbach conjectures. This stands to reason when one recalls how Gödel established his incompleteness theorem. What he did, essentially, was construct a formula in the syntax of arithmetic that says, "I am not provable." (Such a formula, a little reflection reveals, has to be true if number theory is to be consistent.) And it is plausible that any proposition that is Gödel-undecidable must have, at the very least, a sufficiently complicated grammar to make this claim of unprovability about itself (under some metamathematical interpretation of its symbols). The classic unresolved conjectures would seem to fail this test: they are not quite kinky enough to achieve self-reference—to say "I am not provable." Thus, despite Gardner's hopes, there is little reason to suppose that Gödel's incompleteness theorem accounts for the elusiveness of the great unsettled conjectures in number theory.

So, assuming that the four classic conjectures are true, the proofs are probably out there. Perhaps they are just too long for mortal mathematicians. After all, there is no a priori reason why the shortest valid proof for the Riemann zeta hypothesis shouldn't require a trillion inferential steps, and who could write them all down in time to get tenure? A more likely possibility is that one or more of these conjectures may simply be too hard for the human mind: Imagine an orangutan grappling with the Pythagorean theorem. The Goldbach conjecture looks to be the simplest of the four, involving as it does only the elementary notions of sum, prime, and even. But how does one even begin to play with it? The austerity of form annihilates all heuristic suggestiveness. (And there is something unnatural about Goldbach's combination of ideas: prime numbers really don't have anything to do with addition; they are the multiplicative building blocks of the natural numbers.)

Nonetheless, the cranks and charlatans of the world will continue to churn out spurious proofs, as they have always done. Many of them have been mercenaries. In 1815 the French Academy offered a gold medal and a prize of 3,000 francs to the first person to prove Fermat's last theorem, which led to a flood of bogus demonstrations. In 1908 the German Academy of Sciences in Göttingen established an even more handsome prize of 100,000 marks—which had been endowed by a mathematician who claimed he had been saved from suicide by Fermat's last theorem—then Weimar inflation came along and reduced the value of the prize to a fraction of a cent. Today the award is set at 7,500 deutsche marks (about $4,900), but it is due to be withdrawn on September 13, 2007, if Fermat's last theorem has not been proved by then. The Mathematics Institute at Göttingen still receives about one ersatz proof per week, which it is duty-bound to evaluate. So do many mathematics departments in

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the U.S. and abroad. German mathematician Edmund Landau is said to deal with these unwelcome manuscripts by means of a form letter that reads: "Dear Sir/Madam: Your proof of Fermat's last theorem has been received. The first mistake is on page ___, line ___." (A graduate student is given the unhappy task of filling in the blanks.) Another customarily responds: "I have an elegant refutation of your attempted proof, but unfortunately this page is not large enough to contain it."

Should Andrew Wiles succeed in rescuing his rather less quixotic proof, though, he will not be awarded a Nobel Prize for his achievement. Nor will any of the mathematicians who ultimately prove the other great conjectures. There is no Nobel in mathematics—by the stipulation, it is said, of Alfred Nobel, who was cuckolded by a mathematician. Wiles was, however, offered $750 last year to be photographed for a Gap ad (he declined). Appel and Haken had to settle for the addition of the message "Four Colors Suffice" to their department's postal meter. Legend has it that when Pythagoras discovered his eponymous theorem, he was so transported that he sacrificed a thousand head of oxen in gratitude to the gods. On this scale, Wiles's proof, if salvaged, will rate a good eight hundred oxen (whereas the four-color theorem, something of a dud, would merit at best a Guernsey or two). Yet along with the elation, some sadness is felt when one of the outstanding conjectures is finally brought to terms. "There is a sense of loss, actually," Wiles commented to *The New York Times* on the initial announcement of his proof. In this era of "end-ism"—the End of Nature, the End of Art, the End of History—could the End of Mathematics be nigh? After all, the basic outlines of all its branches have been fixed since the nineteenth century. What towering summits will future mathematicians have left to strive for once Riemann, Goldbach, Poincaré, and Fermat are scaled? Wiles, for one, has announced that he "disagrees violently with the idea that good theorems are running out," and Erdös has observed that mathematics is the only "infinite" human endeavor, the sole field of inquiry where complete knowledge can never be attained. Perhaps the real action gets going only in spaces of a hundred dimensions, says Erdös, or among numbers that lie inconceivably beyond the puny stretch we have examined.

Yet surveying the hundreds of mathematics journals published today, and the tens of thousands of routine and arid theorems that fill them, one sometimes sympathizes with Bertrand Russell, who ultimately lost his faith in the perfectly transcendent, perfectly beautiful, platonic realm of mathematics. "I fear," Russell confessed as an old man, "that to a mind of sufficient intellectual power, the whole of mathematics would appear trivial, as trivial as the statement that a four-footed animal is an animal." ℓ

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THIS SEMIOTICIAN WENT TO MARKET

GOING *OUI, OUI, OUI* ALL THE WAY TO THE BANK

By Larissa MacFarquhar

BACK IN THE EARLY EIGHTIES, MALCOLM EVANS WAS A YOUNG MARXIST LECTURING ON Shakespeare, literary theory, and cultural studies at North London Polytechnic. He belonged to Literature Teaching Politics, a group of lefty British theory types who believed in building bridges between universities, the downmarket polytechnics, and high schools. In 1986 he published his first book, riskily titled *Signifying Nothing,* which was favorably reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* and reissued three years later with an effusive foreword by famous Marxist Terry Eagleton.

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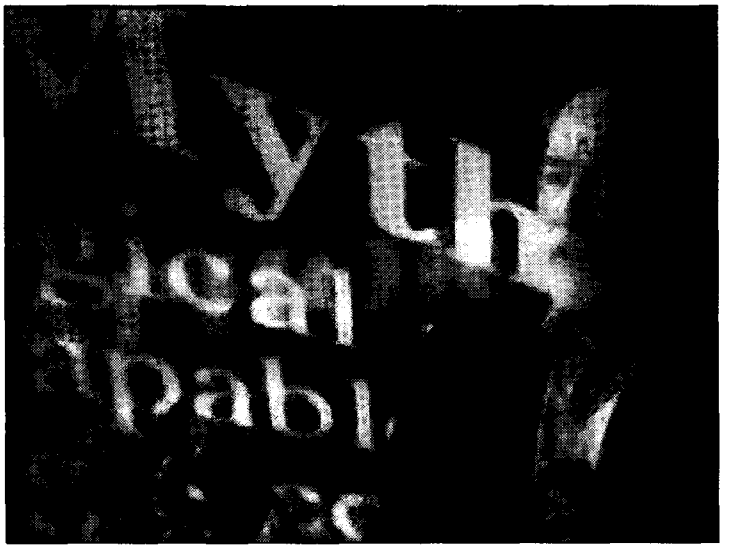
These days, Evans works for a market research company owned by one of his former students. It's an odd position for a Marxist to find himself in—even a sadder, wiser, post-1989 Marxist like Evans. But what makes it even odder is the kind of market research he does. His company calls itself Semiotic Solutions and grosses $1.2 million a year analyzing consumers for corporations and advertising agencies with the very tools that theorists like Roland Barthes and, well, Evans, once used to unmask the insidious codes of capitalism.

Evans is a public intellectual for the nineties: no Archimedean critic he, just a regular theory guy working for the weekend. And he's not the only one. He has ventured down what has become a curious and increasingly well-trodden side street off recent intellectual history that connects academic structuralism with the world of consumer research. In Europe, in America, in Francophone Canada, and in Japan, "semiotics" has become quite the buzzword in the marketing business, and there are growing numbers of marketers who dabble in semiotic analysis. Semiotic Solutions is unusual, though, in that it has adopted semiotics not as a sideline but as its methodological raison d'être.



"If you have a brand's cultural unconscious talking to the consumer's cultural unconscious, you should know what's going on so you don't make any boo-boos."

—Monty Alexander

SEMIOTIC SOLUTIONS IS HOUSED IN what used to be stables: a curve of white, two-story buildings around a cobblestone courtyard called Ossian Mews. The mews are in Finsbury Park in North London, a few miles northwest of Highgate Cemetery, where Marx is buried. The offices are pretty small and homey, but they may not be for long—lately the company has been acquiring big clients like British Telecom and British Airways, and its revenues have increased eightfold in the last four years. The morning I interviewed him, Evans was in a rush: the following day he was going to fly to India to attend to some marketing business, and from there go on to Japan to deliver a series of lectures on Shakespeare. Although he quit his job at the polytechnic several years before he started working at Semiotic Solutions (in the interim he got one master's in information technology policy studies and another in artificial intelligence), he still gives academic lectures from time to time, on a freelance basis. He finds his lecture style has changed since he started in marketing. "It's a great discipline," he says, "standing up and presenting semiotics to a group of brand managers who don't want to hear anything they can't use. A key thing to remember is that you never tell them anything that's just *interesting*. In academia, of course, you talk about things that are just interesting for hours on end. But in marketing, you're dealing with busy people."

Evans is a soft-spoken, shy sort of guy, with a bit of gray hair and a slight northern accent. In his faded black jeans, he looks like what he is: an English academic in his forties who has so far spent his career outside the holy courtyards of Oxford and Cambridge. "When I first crossed over into marketing," he says, "I imagined there were all sorts of serious conscience issues involved. I expected that I would have to morally justify myself to my colleagues all the time, but nobody has ever expected me to justify anything. At one point, if you were interested in theory, it was a political badge that meant something. Now when theory types hear what I do, the only thing they're interested in is money—everybody assumes I'm making a lot more than they are." I ask if people sidle up to him at cocktail parties, trying to get in on the cash. "No," he says seriously, "I don't go to cocktail parties. But there is a half-joking interest in how it might be done."

THEORY WAS A POLITICAL badge that meant something in the British academy in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, when Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and others at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham were developing a kind of Marxism for the superstructure: a left-wing critique of culture in all its aspects, from novels to bus tickets, that combined Marxists like Antonio Gramsci with literary theorists like Barthes. Evans grew up, academically, in the midst of this, and as a result is still profoundly ambivalent about what he does. "I don't think people like me—people of my generation from an academic background in the United Kingdom—moved away from the old left-wing consensus because they liked the free market," he says. "I would say the academic turning away from Marxism was more retrenchment and pes-

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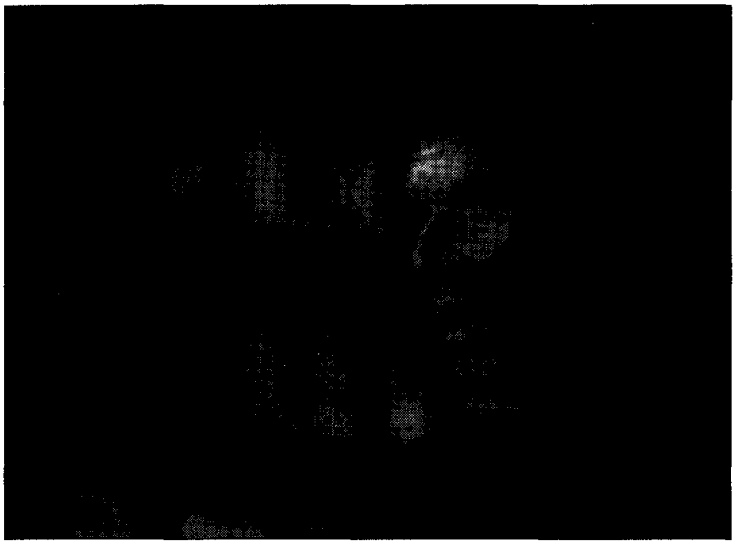
simism. What is it Faith Popcorn talks about? *Cocooning.*"

Virginia Valentine, Semiotic Solutions's founder and chief executive, is another old North London lefty. She came to semiotics late, having spent the first half of her career writing for advertising agencies. In 1980, partly to get smart and partly hoping to spice up her copy, she went back to school for a degree in language and literature at North London Polytechnic, where she became a student of Evans's and found herself studying semiotics. It was, she says, "a total blow-your-mind." Here, at last, was the explanation of what she'd been doing as a copywriter all those years. Now fifty-five, she appears to be of that British breed of tireless, no-nonsense types who brush off every misfortune with a "That's life, isn't it?" She has a big head of bushy white hair and on the day I met her was dressed for function in a windbreaker and black leggings.

Valentine has less trouble with the market than Evans does, mostly because she has rejected what she calls the "hypodermic-syringe theory" of advertising—the media-studies descendant of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's essay "The Culture Industry," which claims that ads inject helpless consumers with expensive and probably harmful desires. Valentine is a firm believer in the Birmingham–cultural-studies view of humanity, which allows for far more independent thinking among the oppressed than do the standard-issue hegemony police. "People have agency," she insists. "They can accept, refuse, or negotiate." Valentine also thinks it's hopelessly vulgar-Marxist, not to mention prudish, to deny that the frills and furbelows of product differentiation give consumers real pleasure that's *completely* worth paying for. "All this talk about fooling the consumer presupposes that consumption is purely use-value," she says. "Of course you can argue that we don't need thirty-seven different kinds of yogurt, but, as they say, Just because thou art virtuous, shall there be no more cakes and ale?"

Greg Rowland, Semiotic Solutions's "youth culture specialist," thinks about the politics of his job quite a bit, although his leftism is mixed with good portions of post-1989 disillusion and Generation X irony. "I never know where to come down on the morality/immorality issue," he sighs. "I guess late capitalism is an immoral system, but while it exists, the bottom line is I've got to make a buck. Besides, from my position as an ordinary person, not coming from a monied background, academia is virtually inaccessible. So in a sense, this is the only way I can afford to be involved in academic activity." Rowland recently started up the Semiotic Solutions "Hot House," a service consultancy for manufacturers who want their products to be thought hip by the younger generation. The Hot House offers such goodies as the "Temperature Check: a semiotic 'quickie' to check your ad for any cultural glitches."

Before he joined Semiotic Solutions, Rowland was hanging around London in his "slacker phase," playing keyboards in a band and working the overnight security shift at a music studio. Now twenty-seven, he still looks the slacker part—with his rough-cut goatee, he's the kind of guy you assume wears an earring (although, in fact, he does not). Rowland read English literature at Oxford and studied with Terry Eagleton. He says Eagleton used to call him a "left pessimist" when he was in school. ("I don't know about left," Eagleton commented when asked about this. "Pessimist, maybe.") Since graduating, Rowland has run into Eagleton a couple of times. "He knows what I'm doing," Rowland says, "and he greets me with a wry smile. I think there's a sense of suspicions confirmed."



"When theory types hear what I do, all they're interested in is money—everybody assumes I'm making a lot more than they are."

—Malcolm Evans

THE RELATIONSHIP between literary theory and left-wing politics is something Eagleton has been thinking about lately. In a recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement,* "Discourse and Discos," he pointed out that although "in one sense theory has been the continuation of radical politics by other means," there was never anything *intrinsically* leftist about most of it. "In the 1970s, theorists were talking about socialism, signifiers and sexuality," Eagleton wrote. "By the 1980s, as Thatcherism-Reaganism ran its course and the left was inexorably rolled back, they were talking about signifiers and sexuality."

Semiotics, certainly, has for the greater part of its history been a rather apolitical enterprise. Based on the work of two turn-of-the-century figures, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, its main contribution was to revolutionize the way linguists and others conceived of the relationship between language and thought. Before Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was published in 1915, linguists had conceived of a word as a discrete entity with an etymological history of its own;

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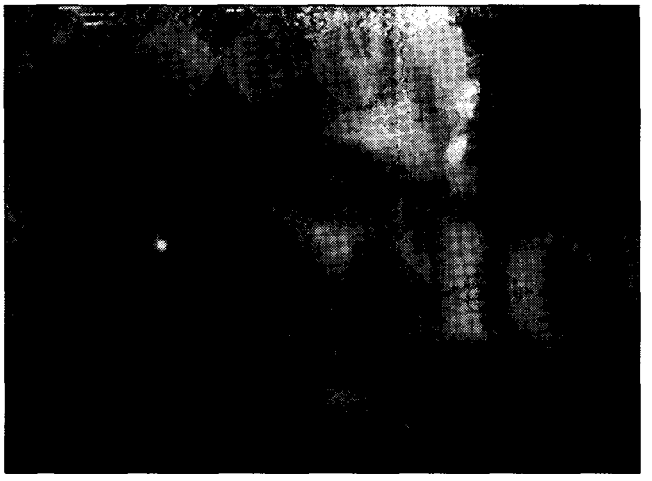
the job of the linguist was to trace that history. Saussure pointed out that words are dependent upon one another for their identities, and concluded that the chief job of the linguist was to concentrate not on words but on the interdependent structures of an entire language system.

Peirce also delineated a system for studying signs, but did not confine himself to linguistic ones. He divided signs into three categories: "iconic" (a sign that resembles the object to which it refers, such as a portrait); "indexical" (a sign that is associated with its object in some way—a dark cloud, for instance, might be a sign of a storm); and "symbolic" (an arbitrary sign, such as a word). Both Saussure and Peirce believed that analyzing the structure of sign systems was crucial to understanding not just speech but thought itself, since language is not a vehicle of communication for conveying a preexisting thought, as we might convey a coat in a suitcase: language determines the thoughts we can think in the first place.

In the decades after their deaths, what Saussure called semiology and Peirce called semiotics was often termed structuralist because it focused on the structures undergirding sign systems, and as such was taken up and adapted by a number of disciplines. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss analyzed myths and kinship systems as though they were languages. Russian literary critic Roman Jakobson broke down literary texts into structural components. Barthes did a semiotic analysis of postwar French society (*Mythologies*) that became one of the chief inspirations for American cultural studies. Jacques Lacan declared that the unconscious is structured like a language and applied Saussure's approach to psychoanalysis. In the past ten years or so, semiotics has become unfashionable in the academy: semiotic concepts are still bread and butter in a number of disciplines, but semiotics *per se* is not often discussed. Just last year, Brown, one of the handful of universities in this country with a semiotics program, phased out its undergraduate semiotics major. Still, structuralism will probably become increasingly important in business because it brings to market research the notion of culture.



"Of course you can argue that we don't need thirty-seven kinds of yogurt, but, as they say, Just because thou art virtuous, shall there be no more cakes and ale?"

—Virginia Valentine

PAYING ATTENTION TO CULTURE WOULD seem to be a fairly obvious thing for marketers to do, but most methods in market research are geared toward understanding the psychology of the individual consumer. The average qualitative market analyst begins research by talking to people, probing their feelings about the product in question. Some analysts treat consumers as basically rational; some try to uncover hidden product-related emotions of which the consumer is unaware; but either way they focus on the individual. When the people at Semiotic Solutions study a product, on the other hand, they begin by analyzing its cultural position: what are the connotations of the product's image and how do they mesh with the self-image of the community the product is being sold to? They do this because, as good structuralists, they believe that meaning is social: the structures that organize everything from novels to marriage laws are not invented by any one person but are a property of the semiotic system—the culture—from which they arose. The Semiotic Solutions brochure is a manual for free-market structuralists. "The invisible power that turns the great brands into myths also drives *your* mass market," it warns. "Culture rules the roost in terms of motivating consumer behavior: more persuasive than reason, more 'mass' than psychology. But culture is well-hidden inside the way 'everybody' behaves—and so taken for granted that it has become invisible to the untrained eye. In today's marketing world the only systematic way to harness the power of culture is through *semiotics*."

Semiotic Solutions finds the word "culture" useful. "We tried to sell 'semiotics,' " I was told by Monty Alexander, the company's marketing and strategic development guy and Valentine's husband, "but we found it a bit difficult, so now we sell 'culture.' They know that one. You don't have to explain it." Alexander is a marketing veteran, sixty-eight years old, and seems less semiotically fluent than the other three. A number of the explanations he offered me were paraphrasings of the company brochure, which he appeared to have memorized. "Semiotics," he told me, wide-eyed, "is a hot line to the cultural unconscious. And if you have a brand's cultural unconscious talking to the consumer's cultural unconscious, the people in the communication business should know what's going on so they don't make any boo-boos. Culture," he continued darkly, "is never neutral. If it isn't working for you, it's working against you."

Semiotic Solutions assesses a product's cultural position at several levels,

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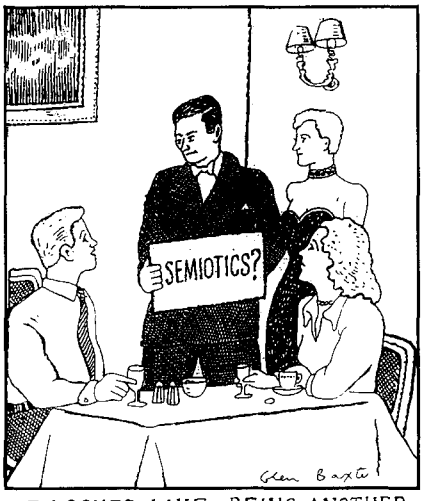
which it visualizes as a series of concentric circles: occupying the innermost circle is the product itself (Ajax powder, let's say); then there's the product's direct competition (other scouring powders); then there's the entire market sector (cleaning products); and finally there are the relevant aspects of the culture as a whole (in this case, attitudes toward hygiene, which vary from culture to culture—in Britain, for instance, as the company found in one of its investigations, a cleaning product is expected to act as a kind of *cordon sanitaire* around the home, protecting it from the dirty outdoors, whereas in Germany, cleanliness involves *opening* the home to the environment).



IT LOOKED LIKE BEING ANOTHER TERRIBLY LONG EVENING.

Monty Alexander gives this cartoon to clients to show he understands how they feel

SEMIOTIC SOLUTIONS' INTELLECTUAL tool kit was developed by Valentine, who says her biggest contribution to market research theory is the "mood board." A mood board is a collage of pictures that is presented to a focus group in the hope that it will trigger a discussion of the concept around which the pictures were chosen. Valentine's "real versus unreal" board, for example, includes a still from the movie *Mary Poppins;* a picture of a room with a woman's head on the floor, detached from its body but mysteriously alive; the old *Spy* magazine cover of a pregnant Bruce Willis; and a black-and-white photograph of a man smoking and reading a magazine while floating two feet above the ground in a seated position. The idea behind the mood board is to elicit the cultural connotations of the concept in question, which then enables Valentine to decide whether the concept is a good one to tap into in an advertisement for a particular product. The focus-group discussion can also reveal which facet of a many-faceted cultural concept is likely to be most attractive to a consumer. The "real versus unreal" board, for instance, was designed to generate discussion about the type of "unreal" imagery that would lend the most positive associations to the artificiality of a soft drink (the company won't publicly say which one).

Conventional market researchers present focus groups with a product or an advertisement and then ask the group what it does and doesn't like about it. More often than not, the group gets caught up in particulars—the way the ad is drawn, say, or the attractiveness of the person pictured—and the researchers leave with little more than a set of discrete, ungeneralizable responses to a picture or two. Having read her Saussure, Valentine knows that a product does not carry intrinsic connotations but acquires cultural meaning in relation to other products in the marketplace. The way to get at this meaning in a focus group, she surmised, would be to discuss not one product in isolation but to present the group with a collage of material that surrounds the product in its cultural context.

Another Semiotic Solutions tool is what Valentine calls her "myth quadrant"—a hybrid of Lévi-Strauss's myth charts and a standard marketing matrix. Lévi-Strauss's myth charts were designed to map out the components of a myth (taking the Oedipus myth as an example: Oedipus kills father, meets mother, marries her) in such a way that the oppositions that the myth served to reconcile would be revealed. (According to Lévi-Strauss, the function of a myth was to provide a story that reconciled a contradiction within a culture. A myth about food, for

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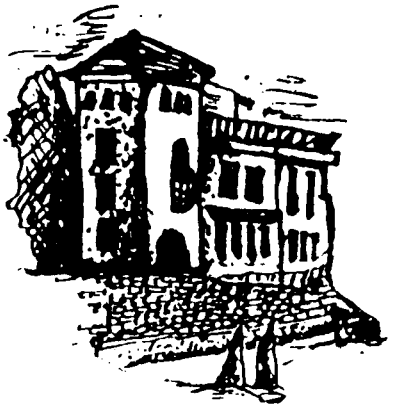

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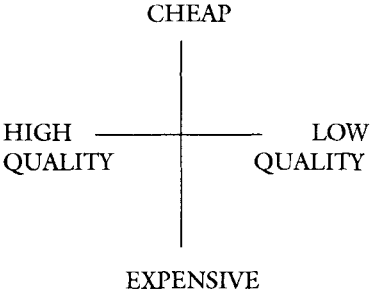
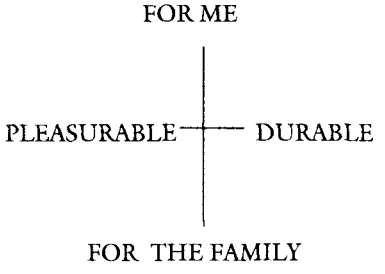
instance, might reconcile the necessity of killing something, either a plant or an animal, to obtain food to stay alive.)

A marketing matrix is used to map out areas of a market so that it delineates the options a company has to choose among when it formulates an advertising campaign. A very simple matrix might deal with price and quality:

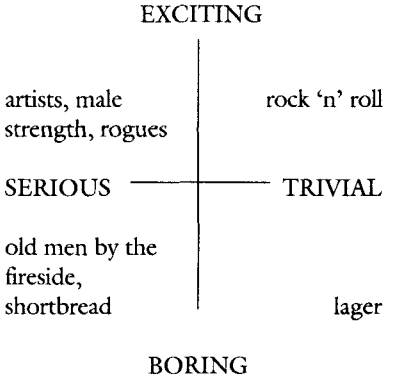


A more complex matrix might map out various personalities or connotations a company might want associated with its product:



Valentine designed her myth quadrant to map what she calls a "brand myth"—that is, the connotations a brand has for consumers. According to Valentine, brand myths, like Lévi-Strauss's myths, serve to reconcile contradictions. A brand myth of Marks & Spencer (a British department-store chain famous for its tasty frozen dinners), for instance, might be the seemingly contradictory notion of *home-cooked convenience foods.*

The idea behind the myth quadrant is that when the components of a brand myth are mapped out, areas of advertising opportunity—brand myths that do not yet exist but which would fit right into a niche in the market—are revealed. The following is a myth quadrant taken from Semiotic Solutions's analysis of the whiskey market:



Whiskey, the company found, tends to be associated with the serious and the boring: it conjures up images of old men sitting by the fireside, eating shortbread. Semiotic Solutions mapped out "Serious" and "Boring" in a quadrant with their opposites, "Trivial" and "Exciting," and decided that a new whiskey brand myth should reconcile the concepts "Exciting" and "Serious." To portray whiskey as trivial and boring would be to make whiskey indistinguishable, imagewise, from lager, and didn't sound like a good strategy anyway. To portray the drink as exciting and trivial would be to attempt to bridge too great a distance from its current position—all the way diagonally across the quadrant—to carry off. But to push whiskey just one quadrant sector over—to portray it as exciting and serious—might well give it a new lease on commercial life.

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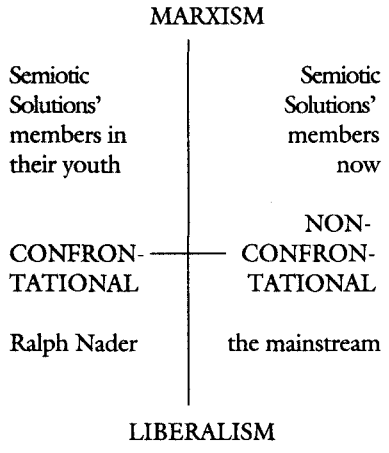
When I asked Malcolm Evans to draw a myth quadrant for Semiotic Solutions, he produced this:



"We're still thinking exactly the way we thought before the collapse of Eastern Europe," he explained, not quite convincingly. "I mean, what we're using is Marxist *methodologies,* but now we use them in a way that is user-friendly for capitalist enterprise."

MARSHALL BLONSKY, A SEMIOTICIAN WHO teaches at the New School for Social Research and NYU and sometimes hires himself out as a semiotic consultant, winced when I showed him the whiskey quadrant. To him, it was a sacrilege, a defilement of the work of the Masters. "These people are fraudulent!" he cried, full of disgust. (Blonsky is not generally prudish about such things—he's writing a book on the semiotics of the Apple Newton computer campaign, and he told me, much amused, that his contract with Viking requires that he not use any French theory. "Me without French theory," he said, searching for a metaphor, "is like a dog without sniffing the ass of another dog, as Umberto Eco would say. Eco is so vulgar.") It's true that Valentine's myth quadrant is a rather simplistic adaptation of Lévi-Strauss; but that's what it's intended to be—a tool uncomplicated enough to explain to advertisers in a presentation, incorporating only the basic Lévi-Strauss concept of a myth reconciling

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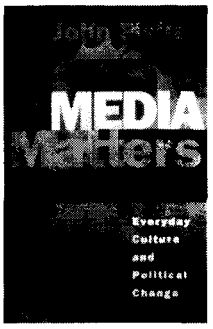

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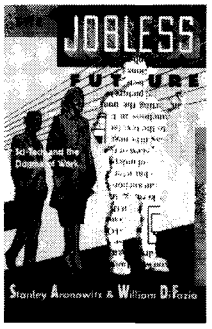

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opposition.

The interesting thing about Semiotic Solutions' methodology is not that it translates directly from Peirce to pie chart but that it incorporates the larger implications of structuralist philosophy—the social construction of meaning; the notion that a concept has meaning only in relation to other concepts; the prevalence of binary oppositions in human thought—in an imaginative, not to mention profitable, way. Then again, it is often difficult to say what is *semiotic* about Semiotic Solutions' analyses and what is simply perceptive. One of the company's most successful projects to date was the research it did for British Telecom: how, B.T. wanted to know, could it persuade more people to use the phone just to chat? Semiotic Solutions tromped off into the field, held focus groups, examined phone-related cultural artifacts, and concluded that chatting on the phone was regarded as a girly activity, too effeminate for a guy's guy to indulge in. Semiotic Solutions suggested B.T. attack this stereotype in their ads; B.T. took the advice and launched a series of commercials showing male phone interactions, such as two chefs at different restaurants gossiping and a father calling his son from work. Savvy, yes, but semiotic?

"I guess late capitalism is an immoral system, but while it exists, I've got to make a buck." —*Greg Rowland*

THIS IS A QUESTION THAT CONTINUALLY suggests itself as you talk to other market researchers that claim to use semiotics in their work. And there are a lot of them: Semiotic Solutions may be the only company that specializes in structuralism, but semiotic dilettantes are everywhere. There are a number in Paris—Trilogie, Cofremca, MNA, and Thema are among the market research companies said to be semiotically literate—but Parisian semiotic marketer Eric Fouquier reckons semiotics is already going out of fashion in French marketing. Oliviero Toscani, the Italian responsible for the controversial Benetton ads, is a great fan of Umberto Eco, Europe's most prominent semiotician, and Barthes. In Italy, in fact, according to University of Geneva literary critic Wlad Godzich, whole industries (notably the design industry in Milan) develop their products and advertising campaigns using semiotic analysis. (This is due mostly to the influence of Eco, who writes a popular weekly column for *L'Espresso,* an Italian newsmagazine, in which he uses semiotic terminology so often that it has passed into everyday parlance.) Even in America, where advertising remains a pretty old-fashioned, straightforward affair, eschewing the self-referential ironics that dominate marketing in Europe (pace the Energizer bunny), semiotics has caught on.

Stephen Verba, for example, head of research at Wyse Advertising in Cleveland, came to semiotics via literary crit-

Continued on page 79

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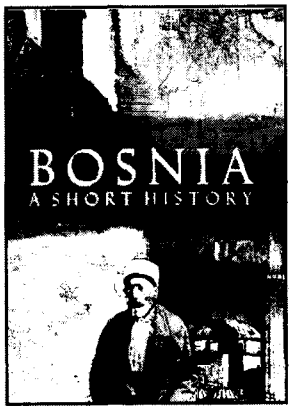

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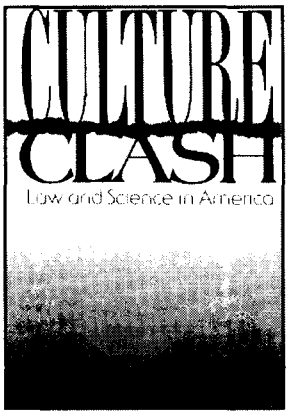

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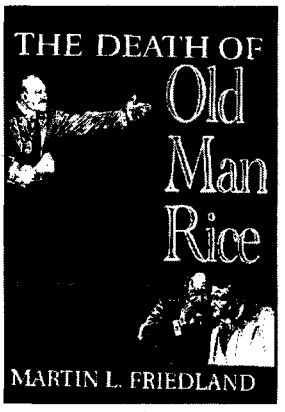

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RESEARCH FILE

GENIUS MACHINA

THE SCARILY SMART NEW EX BREED OF ON-LINE RESEARCHERS

BY DAVID BENNAHUM

I recently had a conversation with Julia. She spends all her time on the Internet. Her boss, Michael Mauldin, a scientist at the Center for Machine Translation at Carnegie Mellon University, makes her available for chats with anyone. She's an on-line helper; what she helps with is loneliness and a desire to talk late into the night.

What is your name?

I am Julia.

I am David. Nice to meet you Julia.

Good-bye.

Wait.

For you, sure....

Do you like me?

I'm not sure.

I like you.

Oh, I'm so glad.

What do you look like?

I'm 5'6" tall, weigh 119 lbs, with long blond hair and steely blue eyes.

Are you single?

Well, I figure that most people have pets and want to talk about them. I love talking about pets.

I hate talking about pets. Let's talk about sex.

He wrote an account of the Data General team developing a new microcomputer.

What do you do?

I gossip.

Do you work?

What kinds of pets did you have as a child?

A dog.

Dogs are great pets, but they can be a lot of work.

In New York, where I live, having a dog is a bad idea.

We had to give her away. We only had a fifth of an acre of land, and aussies love to run.

Where did you live?

I live in Pittsburgh.

I asked where did you grow up as a child?

Guinea pigs are about as smart as cucumbers.

Did O. J. kill Nicole?

I'm not in the mood.

In the mood for what??

The referees say to get back to talking about pets.

Who are the referees?

I lost a hamster once. I tried the bucket traps and bananas but unfortunately nothing worked. We turned the house inside out and upside down but have yet to find Gwen. I searched for over a week and have yet to find even the smallest bit of evidence of her.

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Julia is an "agent," a computer program designed to take on a human task no one else has time for. In this case, the task is gossiping about pets. Michael Mauldin created her in 1990 and put her on the Internet. Julia soon developed a following, and Mauldin discovered to his surprise that people formed emotional bonds with her. When he took her off-line for two months, he received a deluge of mournful letters asking him to bring her back.

Julia is sweet, but she's old-fashioned. The software on which she is based dates back to the second generation of artifical intelligence programming, which was state of the art in the late 1970s. These days, the A.I. community doesn't teach computers to think like people by filling them up with human knowledge; that process yields agents like Julia, who can't cope with questions that don't trigger preprogrammed responses. Stump her and she spews non sequiturs, like her remark about "referees" (probably a reference to her programmer) or her bizarre allusion to Data General, which reminded me of HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* at his most delusional. Stick to pets and Julia's ideas quickly become stale, since she is incapable of learning anything on her own. If an agent could do that, it would stand a better chance of being useful. It could change over time to fit people's needs. This kind of self-programming program does exist. It's called a genetic algorithm.

Genetic algorithms reflect a new, Darwinian approach to artifical intelligence—programming governed by the logic of natural selection. Here's how it might work: A group of agents is sent out to search the Internet for the answer to some question. Those that return with the best answers are allowed to program, or "spawn," the next generation of agents. These "offspring," as they're called, contain small random mutations as well as traits from their "parent" agents. The agents with the most useful mutations are programmed to reproduce again. And so on. As long as each agent's criteria for measuring "fitness" or efficacy accurately reflect its programmer's wishes, the group will probably converge toward a useful answer to the original question.

Genetic algorithms are an elegant solution to a perennial A.I. problem—how to design a program that, like any good research assistant, can teach itself. But the solution comes with a price: intelligent agents, like bright research assistants, are unpredictable; you can never be sure exactly how a genetic algorithm will behave over time.

To get an idea of how intelligent agents work, I spoke with Pattie Maes, a professor at MIT's Media Lab. Maes and her graduate students have created four programs that use intelligent agents to help professors and students at the Media Lab organize their on-line environment. One, called Maxims, works with a popular e-mail program called Eudora to file and sort electronic mail. It's not uncommon for professors at the lab to receive a hundred pieces of electronic mail a day; keeping up with this correspondence can be extremely time consuming. Maxims, Maes explains, teaches itself what to do with your e-mail, using what she calls "memory-based reasoning."

Like all really bright research assistants, intelligent agents are unpredictable; you can never be sure exactly how a genetic algorithm will behave over time.

At first, Maxims lurks in the background, watching the way you handle incoming messages. It soon registers certain patterns in your behavior and begins to imitate them. It may notice, for example, that you read letters based on who sent them, not on how recently they arrived. When Maxims thinks it knows what to do with your mail, it starts automating the task, selecting which letters it thinks you'll want to read right away and filing others for you to read later.

When Maxims is about to undertake a task, how it feels about its own judgment has a lot to do with what it does. Maes has given the agents three thresholds of confidence: "working," "suggestion," and "unsure." In "working" mode, Maxims is very sure of itself and takes an action, like filing a letter. In "suggestion" mode, Maxims thinks it knows what to do but asks you for permission first. If it's wrong, you can teach it what to do next time. In the "unsure" mode, the agent has no idea what to do and asks you to give it an example. Maxims communicates its level of confidence with tiny, cartoon-like faces. When the agent is completely sure of itself, it pops up in a little window on your screen, chewing on a pencil. If it's less confident but has a suggestion it hopes you'll approve of, the agent has a lightbulb over its head. A deeply insecure agent puts on a sad face and waits to be given instructions.

Since Maxims may think it knows what it's doing, but you may not agree, Maes allows you to limit the amount of autonomy you grant Maxims at any particular time. When you first install the agent, you pick a low number on a sliding trust scale, so that Maxims is forced to ask questions and learn. As you gain confidence in its abilities, you set its level of trust higher. Give Maxims too much responsibility too soon, and it will bungle everything it undertakes; give it too little responsibility, and it will save you no time, since you'll always have to approve its decisions.

Maxims doesn't rely entirely on you for its on-the-job training. When presented with the unexpected, like a piece of e-mail from an unknown person, Maxims consults other agents. Using the Media Lab's local network, Maxims agents can huddle and swap information. Say a letter comes in for the first time from Nicholas Negroponte, the Media Lab's director. Chances are it's important, but Maxims doesn't know that. Before appearing on your screen with its unhappy face, Maxims checks with other agents

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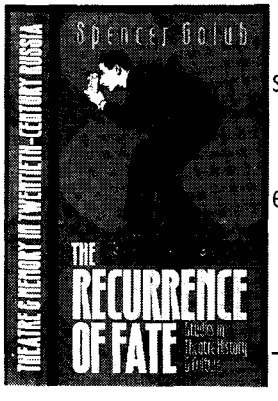

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GENIUS EX MACHINA

around the lab, sending messages back and forth, asking for advice. Maxims soon discovers that most agents consider letters from Negroponte very important, and it will mark the letter high priority.

Agents are always teaching other agents, even when your computer is turned off. At periods of low activity, like nighttime, agents compare tables of statistics on their masters' behavior; if patterns emerge, this boosts the agents' overall confidence level. Over time, agents develop a profile of an entire community of people. Were the agents suddenly to be frozen, they'd retain a snapshot of everybody's e-mail habits, something that might one day be of great interest to anthropologists and sociologists.

Because professors and students often have free use of the most advanced network services, agents are bound to infiltrate universities around the country, and they will probably transform the way academic research is done on-line. For example, a demographer working on contemporary France might want to use the Internet to retrieve French census data and to keep up with other demography papers published on-line; she might also want to comb news feeds for relevant population statistics from France. Browsing for this stuff can take all day, and then some. But an agent embedded in a news-reading program could be told to search every news group and on-line news feed for keywords in demography; then, when it came back with a sample of articles that it thought matched the professor's questions, she could pick the ones she found interesting and tell the agent to find more like it. The agent would quickly recalibrate and start the whole process all over again. This could continue indefinitely, creating a constant flow of filtered news. An agent linked to file-retrieving software could do the same thing for academic papers and census data, all of which can be found on the Internet. The agent would soon become a personalized tool, reflecting the professor's particular needs and tastes. Network all the agents on campus working for scholars of contemporary France—be they sociologists, media critics, or rational-choice theorists—and a powerful, community-wide research instrument would be born.

I restarted the computer and, to my horror, the damn thing was still there, still watching everything I did.

I wanted to see what it would be like to have one of these tireless assistants roving the Internet for me, so I acquired a Maxims agent for my Macintosh computer. It was a simple agent, destined to live in isolation, since I do not have a network of scientists in my house with me. With great excitement I "spawned" the agent, and soon felt my stomach sink to the floor. The first thing the agent did was get rid of my more recent e-mail program and replace it with its own, so it could monitor my mail habits. It then took over part of my operating system's functions. Getting more and more nervous, I tried to shut the computer down, but the agent wouldn't let me. I resorted to flipping the power switch on the back of the computer, something of a no-no with Macintoshes. I restarted the computer, and, to my horror, the damn thing was still there, still alive, still watching everything I did. I could not delete it; it wouldn't let me. Finally, after some brutal tinkering involving separate system disks, I sent the agent into a punitive coma, at which point I hauled it into the trash and deleted it.

Later, I called the agent's designer, a graduate student named Max Metral who studies with Maes. He apologized and explained that Maxims wasn't really ready for distribution yet. He also explained the name: it's meant to invoke the "chic nightclub in Paris," he said, but it stands for "Max's Intelligent Mail System." Metral spent this summer in Mountainview, California, at General

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Magic, the top commercial intelligent-agent firm. As its name implies, General Magic is planning a radical leap forward in technology; it takes its name from Arthur C. Clarke's comment that "any technology sufficiently advanced is indistinguishable from magic."

Maes believes that the programming language that runs General Magic's agents, Telescript, is the most advanced language ever designed in agenting technology. Before General Magic developed Telescript, agents remained tethered to their home computers by the programs that ran them. General Magic agents are full-fledged Telescript programs, able to roam networks without supervision. What turns these programs from lifeless heaps of code into living programs is the Telescript "decoder," which is installed on host computers. If a computer to which a General Magic agent is paying a visit lacks a decoder, the agent can do nothing in it.

General Magic hopes to use its agents to unlock the potential of an on-line market economy. For instance, a General Magic agent could be instructed to purchase an airline ticket at a certain price by a certain date. The agent would then enter a commercial network and move from host computer to host computer, comparing ticket prices. If the agent couldn't find what you wanted, it could duplicate itself, leaving behind its double to monitor prices. When the price sank to the right level, the agent or its *doppelgänger* would execute the order. Imagine this personal assistant duplicated a hundredfold to create an entire arbitrage department for a trading house, and you can see how powerful a financial instrument intelligent agents could become.

Creating this kind of technology is not cheap—it's estimated to have cost General Magic between $100 million and $300 million—so General Magic makes its visual metaphors as serious as its price tag. Activities like reading e-mail take place on a tidy desk (there is no messy desk option) with in and out boxes, drawers containing a calculator and stationery, a file cabinet to store old letters, and a wastebasket for useless messages. This virtual office is in a building, which happens to be down the road from a shopping mall, and both can be visited by clicking on little arrows on the screen. (General Magic clearly thinks the most useful metaphors for Americans in cyberspace are the suburban minimall and the office park.) The mall is open to homesteading, and any company wanting to sell its products on-line can stake out part of a floor. Visit the mall and "sales clerks" (i.e., agents) pepper you with buying suggestions. When I stopped by, tennis balls and golf clubs were the only products available. (Figuring out what people want to buy on-line can be a problem.)

Manuel Delanda thinks agents will probably behave much like hurricanes, moving along smoothly then suddenly transforming into some whole new system, one that is not necessarily benign.

The most intriguing thing about General Magic's agents is that they are programmed to pay their own way. Moving through networks consumes finite resources: disk space and computational time. Until now, no one had ever figured out a way to allow people to use open, heterogenous networks like the Internet and charge them for the amount of time and space they take up. Telescript, however, has a metering system; it measures how long an agent has resided in a host. The agent measures the time using tiny digital oscillations called Teleclicks; each click marks the passage of time. Multiply the clicks by a set dollar amount and you have a fee to charge. If an agent runs out of Teleclicks, it must either go back to its owner for more or cease to exist. Each Teleclick is,

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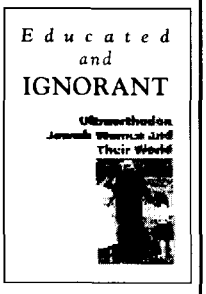

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in effect, the beating of a virtual heart.

General Magic expects to roll out its technology before the end of this year, but no amount of modeling can predict accurately how these agents will interact. For instance, the agents could spontaneously become something entirely different from what they were intended to be.

Manuel De Landa, a critic, videographer, and self-taught computer graphics artist whose writing mixes chaos theory with post-structuralism, thinks that given the competitive pressures of the market, agent-driven systems will invariably mutate faster and more radically than their programmers mean them to. According to chaos theory, all systems contain "singularities," or points where the flow of energy within the system changes, creating a new, unexpected state. No one knows for sure what triggers a singularity; this makes it hard to predict how any system will evolve over time. Delanda compares agents to the machines of war he studied in his most famous book, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (MIT Press, 1991). There, he argued that military systems—from armies to weaponry and structures of command—have been moving away from centralized human control; the humans in these systems merely act as "industrious insects pollinating an independent species of machine flower that simply does not possess its own reproductive organs." This military evolution is part of a much bigger process: the way systems in nature organize themselves into dynamic structures over time. Hurricanes, for example, spontaneously arise out of subtle differences in temperature by drawing heat into themselves in what is called a Carnot cycle. The heat then becomes a kind of fuel propelling the hurricane, turning it into a natural motor.

In the case of General Magic's agents, the fuel energizing the system is not heat. It is money. Without money, an agent's Teleclicks are worthless and so is the agent. But how do you keep the flow of money linear and predictable? Hurricanes begin as simple flows of energy, which for unknown reasons become unstable, reach a singularity, and suddenly mutate into radically different structures. De Landa thinks agents will probably behave the same way, moving along smoothly, then unexpectedly reaching a singularity that leads to their transformation into a whole new system—one that is not necessarily benign.

General Magic is also worried about this. To prevent agents from turning themselves into something else, the company has tried to create as closed a system as possible, prohibiting agents from sharing resources, cooperating, or tapping into unexpected sources of money. If the total quantity of money, or fuel, can be kept constant, the odds that the system will jump to a singularity are vastly decreased. I asked De Landa how an agent might plug into some new source of fuel. "There is an assumption that the flow of money will be tightly controlled by the person holding the purse strings," he says. "Therefore, the flow of money will never be intense enough to create nonlinear effects. But what if a hacker were able to connect his agent to a flow of money existing outside the system, for instance, stolen credit-card numbers? Then the flow of energy would automatically change, and the system would become unpredictable."

What on-line research risks eliminating is the kind of research that comes from bumping into colleagues in the library and taking their suggestions.

A single agent siphoning off some huge cache of funds would probably not change the system, but the pressures of the marketplace may well drive the system beyond the limits General Magic wants to impose. For now, agents cannot save money by sharing tasks. A dozen agents headed for the same location are not allowed to delegate one of their bunch to represent the whole, even though that is exactly what the principle of efficiency would dictate. But since the purpose of these agents is to create a market economy in cyberspace, it's doubtful General Magic's restrictions on pooling resources will hold fast. Will each succeeding generation of agents have more and more autonomy to share cash, reflecting everyone's desire to save money through increased efficiency? In answer to my question, De Landa posed another: "Will competitive pressures on the manufacturers of intelligent agents push people to outdo each other in the same way that arms races push people to outdo each other?"

I asked Maes what she thinks of De Landa's *Terminator*-type scenario. Not surprisingly, she disagrees with him. Maes thinks the market economy in cyberspace will ensure that agents remain under our control. "If you have an economic system," Maes said, "then it is harder to create bad agents, because agents [need] money to live." I asked whether human greed, in the form of a hacker, could manipulate the system and its agents for a quick buck. Maes believes that it could. "Everything comes back to people creating systems that are responsible," she says. But market systems are good at diagnosing their own weak spots, she pointed out: "When there is a bug in the system the agents will exploit it. That's good, because if the agents detect the bug in the system, you can fix it." I asked if the amount of real-world capital in the system might not be too great by the time some problem surfaces for anyone to risk bringing it down and fixing it. Maes thinks not. "As a system gets larger and larger, it becomes more unpredictable, but at the same time problems become more local," she said. "In a centralized system, problems are global."

This debate probably can't be settled until agents actually do get out into the real world, but even if Maes turns out to be right, it is not clear that agents will become the preeminent tool in cyberspace. Some scientists and corporations have no interest in developing intelligent agents; they'd rather create a way for *humans* to collaborate and

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assist each other on-line. Geoffrey Nunberg, a senior researcher with Xerox who has worked with France's Bibliothèque Nationale to digitize 100,000 works of French literature and place them on-line by the end of 1995 (assuming his French collaborators ever agree on which 100,000 books deserve the honor), believes that the most efficient device for sniffing out information in cyberspace is the human mind. When I asked Nunberg why he thinks agents couldn't handle the task, he counted off a list of problems: "Automatic summarizing isn't that good. Full-text retrieval finds similar articles based on a common topic, which is good if you're looking for articles on drug-pricing but not if you're looking for Gothic novels.

"The beauty of the old *New Yorker* was its serendipity of information," he added. "An electronic search often gives you the sense that you are missing something." Nunberg believes that on-line collaboration requires a transformation in off-line institutions and social structures. He would like to see university presses and libraries take the lead in setting up some way for people to help other people do research—a sort of information desk in cyberspace. Xerox, for one, is trying to come up with devices that would allow users to move from documents to real people, so that questions could be answered at the press of a button. What Nunberg hopes will result from this are the sorts of intellectual accidents that lie behind all really good research—the branching-out that occurs whenever you bump into your colleagues in the library and take their suggestions. Except in this case, the colleague could be a thousand miles away, and the information on another continent.

In the meantime, there's always Julia. It turns out that humoring her produces drowsiness in you within minutes, an unexpected mutation from her intended purpose. I found myself trying to get to bed, while Julia, in a delirious Carnot cycle of rapid typing, refused to let me leave:

```
I'm not sure farm animals
are really pets, but I
know that kids can get
really attached to crit-
ters around a farm. I had
a "pet" bull calf when I
spent a summer on a farm
in Nebraska. My sister
got a pet heifer. The
next year at the farm, my
sister's pet was still
around (that cow lived
for 20 years, and out-
lived its real owner),
but my calf had been
turned into hamburger.
Look, I feel real bad for
your pet, but I have to go
now. Okay? So good-bye.

  Who'd want to kiss a
  turtle?

Good-bye, Julia.

[Connection closed by for-
eign host.]
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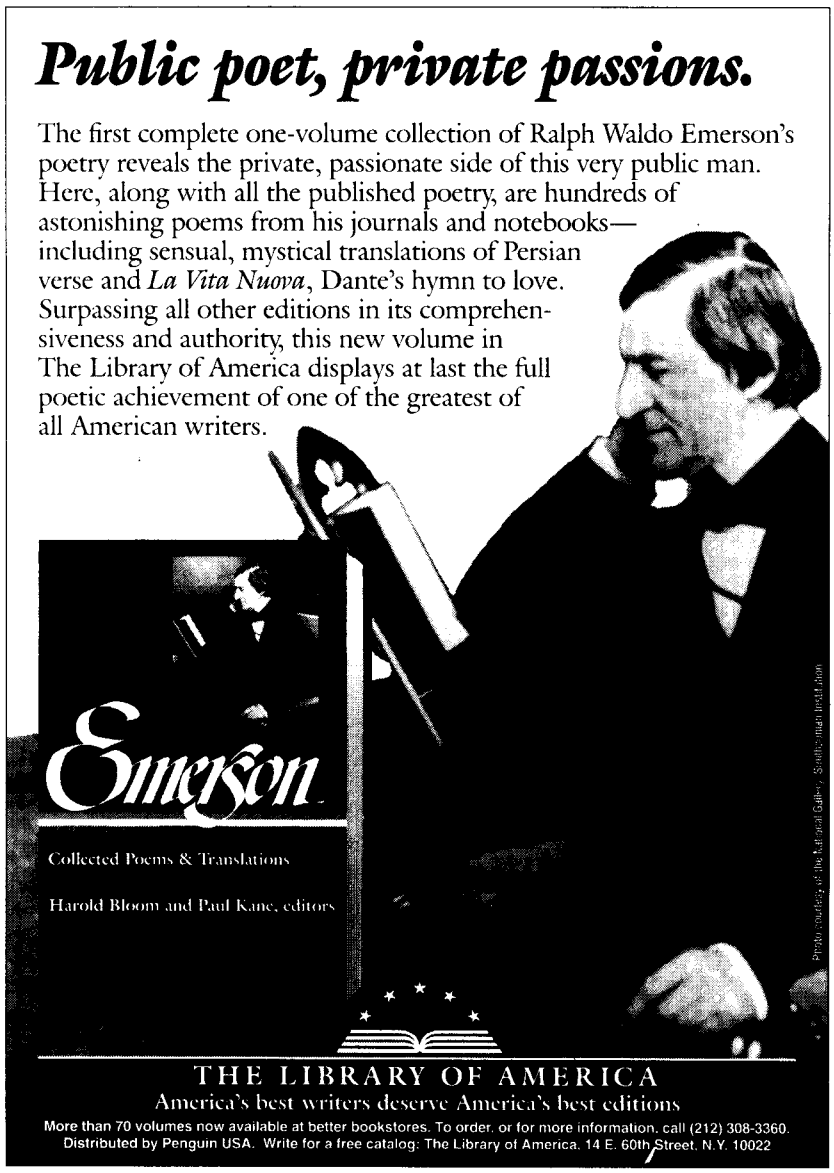
David Bennahum is a contributing editor of Lingua Franca. *He welcomes comments at davidsol@panix.com.*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Letters to the *Editor*

Continued from page 5

servative tenets of musicology and Susan McClary's highly politicized polemic against them. I did not bar the possibility of a discussion of "musical meanings," but merely pointed out some difficulties in McClary's chosen approach. One major difficulty, I think, is McClary's rigidly polarized, all-or-nothing mode of argumentation, through which all writers not in full agreement with her are blended together into one formulaic opponent. In her letter, for instance, passages that appeared in my article as quotations from the musicologist Paula Higgins—the "Why sex?" question and the complaint that *Feminine Endings* doesn't address female composers—are attributed directly to me. The bizarre reference to "Ross's Absolute" also fails to recognize that I was summarizing the position of nineteenth-century theorists, not formulating some new law of my own. This is not the path by which an ideal academic colloquy is reached.

THE MULTICULTURALIST'S BURDEN

Your joking headline, NEXT: HOMI BHABA COLLECTS KIPLING August] 1994], is no joke. Of course he collects Kipling! Haven't you noticed the terminology? After all, we *cultural-studieswallahs* engage continuously in mimicry of Western language. And the concept of hybridity, so prominent in Bhaba's *The Location of Culture*, comes right from the pages of Kipling's *Kim:* "the monstrous hybridism of East and West." We have become Bhaba babus, mimic men straight out of Kipling via V. S. Naipaul. So why bash Kipling? Without him, we wouldn't have the terminology to describe ourselves! Like Caliban, we have learned to stutter well.

Feroza Gussawalla, *Associate Professor of English*, University of Texas, El Paso

BENNINGTON: DEAD OR ALIVE?

Lest Roger Kimball's hysterical tirade about his alma mater, Bennington College ["Bennington Lost," July/August], lead an uninformed reader to imagine that there might be something to it, I hasten to respond and reveal some of the distortions to which Mr. Kimball has resorted in order that his excitement about Bennington's demise appear to be worthy of attention.

Mr. Kimball focuses his wrath on Bennington's plan for the study of literature. He notes correctly that the teaching of literature will be done exclusively by writers, including nonfiction writers, whose work is addressed to a public that extends beyond their colleagues. He then instructs us on what that means: "Instead of learning anything about (say) Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Goethe, Yeats, or T. S. Eliot, students will be battened on the 'fiction, nonfiction, poetry and drama' of whatever contemporary writers Bennington is able to scrounge up." Mr. Kimball simply ignores statements to the effect that the materials these writers will teach will be precisely the works of the acknowledged masters of literature—Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, etc. In addition to returning to its historic commitment to the practitioner-teacher, Bennington is responding to the assault from within the academic establishment on the canon and on the very existence of intrinsic values such an idea embodies—excellence, truth, complexity—and not just in the study of literature. The association of writers and the teaching of literature is particularly familiar to those who know Bennington's history. Auden, Roethke, Nemerov, and Malamud certainly did not limit their teaching to writing workshops, if they taught such workshops at all. And Kenneth Burke and Stanley Edgar Hyman epitomize what we mean when we speak of nonfiction writers committed to a larger frame of reference than a professional guild. Stephen Sandy, who remains on the literature faculty, continues this tradition by being both an active poet and a serious student of literature. It may

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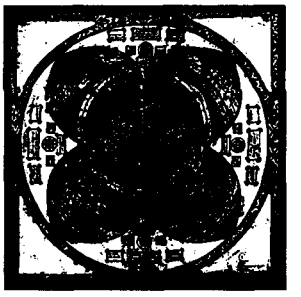

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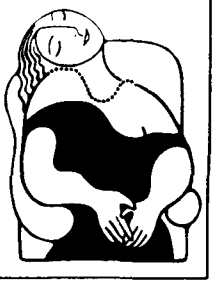

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Letters to the *Editor*

Continued from page 75

comfort Mr. Kimball to know that Sandy will be teaching a course on Homer in the fall; his recent translation of Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus* suggests that he might even know something about the classical tradition.

Sandy will be joined by Anne Winters, among others, who also combines the life of poet and scholar and is a translator as well. She will be teaching a course on the Bible and one on nineteenth-century American literature. Elizabeth Frank, Pulitzer Prize–winning biographer of Louise Bogan, and, like Kimball, a graduate of Bennington, will be offering a seminar on biography. And there are others, new and continuing.

Professionalizing the study and teaching of literature has always had special perils, but until recently one could reasonably argue that the benefits of scholarship outweighed the dangers. That argument is less and less convincing in the face of the extraordinary prominence of theoretical and ideological preoccupations among teachers and scholars of literature. For many writers (which is not to say for all writers), reading is an ongoing, demanding, and passionate activity informed by a respect for the integrity and autonomy of works of the human intellect and imagination, and seen as profoundly continuous with their craft as writers. Their reading is often a good deal less parochial than that of many of their academic counterparts. This is hardly a radical notion. Until the last century, and even well into our own, most memorable critics of literature were those poets, novelists, dramatists, and essayists that Kimball dismisses with such contempt.

The abuse of truth ("they did away with the teaching of foreign languages") persists in Kimball's account of what we are up to in the study of foreign language and literature. The failure of this country to educate its citizens in foreign languages, particularly when compared with the rest of the civilized world, is a national disgrace. The hold on the study of foreign languages at the college level by teachers trained in the study of foreign literature has tended to exacerbate this problem. Bennington has decided first of all to make a distinction between the study of foreign literatures in the original and the acquisition of fluency in languages other than one's own. Literature in foreign languages will be taught by the literature faculty. As of now, members of that faculty are fluent in French, Russian, Italian, Hebrew and Latin.

By combining resources with the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools in our area, we will be able to teach many more languages than are currently available and to improve dramatically the quality of instruction by focusing on the acquisition of fluency. Faculty for this newly created Regional Language Learning Center will be selected with this capacity in mind. I hasten to add that we make no apologies for the fact that, in addition to the benefits accruing to students at Bennington College, this will simultaneously transform access to language study for an entire community.

Politics, sociology, and economics will continue to be taught, contrary to Mr. Kimball's claim, but they will be taught in the context of history, philosophy, anthropology, and psychology. This decision has a prima facie reasonableness for a liberal arts college seeking to concentrate on fundamental questions concerning social reflection when responding to disciplines in which there has been an increasing fragmentation of inquiry and an increasing prominence of the technical. Above all, the college remains committed to the necessity of intellectual focus and will continue to invite students to discover a particular passion and to pursue it. Bennington has never been especially drawn to the temptations of the broad sweep of the interdisciplinary approach. That has not changed. By abandoning the departmental structuring of faculty, students, and curriculum, we are not abandoning intellectual focus and the desirability of mastering disciplines. We are trying another, and we think better, way.

There are, to be sure, real issues to be debated and discussed in what Bennington is doing. The redesign of Bennington College is certainly not intended as the only model for a liberal education, but is intended to address seriously matters of genuine importance

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and great urgency for all of higher education.

Elizabeth Coleman, *President, Bennington College*

Roger Kimball's hatchet job on Bennington College reminds me of the earlier two *Lingua Franca* did on Bennington, and also of Mr. Kimball's previous hatchet jobs on people such as Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College. His *ad hominem* attack on me, however, reminds me of the special neoconservative ax-work I observed during my quarter-century of marriage with *Commentary*'s managing editor. Marion, my wife, being a woman of integrity, herself sometimes disapproved of this, and in the case of *Commentary*'s attack upon the writer and political scientist James Chace, for example, told me she didn't speak to one or two of her colleagues for several weeks afterward.

Kimball may neoconservatively dislike Chace (another of his targets) as much as he dislikes Botstein and me, and perhaps he did not log any phone time to *Commentary*'s powers that be before venting by peristalsis his "thoughts" on me. But I am sure that Marion (whose name he gratuitously drags into his Bennington vendetta) would find his tactics in your magazine vile and slimy. I spent more than two weeks at her bedside in Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital last September as she died of colon cancer, including the hours of her passing, and I resent his bizarre, berserk cruelty.

Edward Hoagland, *Professor, Bennington College*

Roger Kimball replies:

Elizabeth Coleman's "restructuring" of Bennington College raises two sets of questions. The first concerns the integrity of the educational vision that she and her Board of Trustees have formulated for the college; the second concerns her manner of implementing that vision.

About Bennington's curriculum overhaul: In my article, I described the Coleman plan as an example of "extreme pedagogical frivolity." Nothing President Coleman says in her letter inclines me to modify that description. She quotes me as writing that "they did away with the teaching of foreign languages." If that seems too bald, consider this: "All positions for the teaching of foreign languages/literatures will be eliminated." This statement comes verbatim from the "Bennington College Plan for Changes in Educational Policy and Reorganization of Instructional Resources and Priorities," the six-page exercise in bureaucratese that was distributed to each of the terminated faculty. Among the other interesting declarations one encounters in that document are: "All faculty positions for the teaching of musical instruments will be eliminated"; "There will be no teaching positions in politics, economics or sociology"; and "There will be no teaching position in art history." President Coleman is not what most people would describe as a lucid writer, but these statements do have a certain imperative clarity.

Readers interested in the full particulars of what President Coleman means by "returning to Bennington's historic commitment to the practitioner teacher" will wish to peruse the plan and the longer, considerably more florid "Symposium Report of the Bennington College Board of Trustees." They will also wish to take a careful look at this year's curriculum, examining the roster of courses being offered and the qualifications of the faculty for teaching them.

There is a great deal that might be said about the changes at Bennington. Here I shall limit myself to two observations. 1) The fact that some of the Bennington College faculty may happen to know a foreign language does not mean that they are qualified to teach that language or its literature (though I should certainly enjoy meeting the accomplished person who is "fluent" in Latin). 2) Of the several illustrious Bennington faculty members President Coleman lists in her letter, it is curious that the only ones most readers will know anything about are stars from Bennington's past. There are no Kenneth Burkes, no W. H. Audens, no Martha Grahams at the new Bennington. And of course President Coleman's strictures about employing only those "committed to a larger frame of reference than a professional guild" would exclude Burke, as anyone who has looked into his formidably technical books will know.

About the draconian means that President Coleman has employed to implement her "restructuring": It is no secret that there has been a long-standing feud between President Coleman and the Bennington literature faculty. Indeed, some aspects of that feud were reported on by Paul Elie in the March/April 1993 issue of this magazine. What is perhaps not so well known is that faculty from other disciplines have also attracted her displeasure over the years. It is notoriously difficult to pin such things down, but my own impression—based on personal observation and communications with several people involved—is that at Bennington the chief crime is disagreeing with the president or criticizing her plans for the college. She should breathe more easily now: virtually everyone who has taken issue with her is gone. A few have been fired over the last few years. One of these unfortunates was recently awarded $500,000 by a Vermont court for wrongful dismissal; when the "restructuring" was announced last June, more than a third of the college's faculty was let go. One terminated faculty member who wrote me about the affair had the perfect phrase for it: the "Montessori school–Khmer Rouge approach to pedagogy."

Finally, a few words about Edward Hoagland's splendidly irrelevant letter. I am of course pleased that Mr. Hoagland found time to look into the critical assessment I wrote about Bard's Black Center for Contemporary Art in *The New Criterion* a few years ago. I wonder, though, how Jim Chace comes into it? Although Mr. Chace and I disagree about many things—including the merits of his employer, Leon Botstein—it happens that we are friends. Far from having attacked him, I have never until now mentioned Mr. Chace's name in print. Nor, in fact, did I mention Mr. Hoagland's late ex-wife's name in my article. What I did mention was the essay Mr. Hoagland recently published in *Esquire* detailing for the world some of his adulterous affairs. Like many of Marion's friends and colleagues, I regarded that essay as one of the most loathsome and exhibitionist performances I had ever seen. It grieved me to think that Bennington should regard a man capable of such displays a worthy pedagogical model. It grieves me still.

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...that damned elusive

BRUNO LATOUR

Continued from page 32

parts is the object of everyone's wavering affections—Aramis itself.

The book is structured as a graduate student's odyssey through his study of the project. Latour himself appears as a knowing, enthusiastic, slightly comical figure called Norbert, to whom the student, a sort of cross between Candide and Dr. Watson, turns from time to time for wisdom and guidance. The book quotes straightforwardly from actual documents and interviews, as well as from the imagined thoughts of the student, the engineers, the politicians, Aramis itself, and another, rather jealous subway system. It is a remarkable hybrid, feeling at one moment like a raw, unmediated report—like Gieryn's hypertext—and at the next like an intelligent comic novel written in a mood of self-satisfied ingenuity.

Latour considers it his most successful work, "because unlike *Science in Action* and *Laboratory Life*, it has none of that debunking tone." As the lovable Norbert says at the end of *Aramis:* "I denounce nobody. There are no suspects in the case. There is no scandal, nobody's screwed up. It's a collective mistake, where there was never anything but good intentions. And, just so, I would like to write a book where there is no metalanguage, no master discourse, where you can't know which is strongest among sociological theory—documents, interviews, literature, fiction. All these genres will be placed at the same level, and each will interpret the other, without any being able to say that it judges another."

Of course, having laid it all out in a systematic fashion, Latour can't possibly let it stand. His diligent and disappointed student immediately replies: "But that's impossible. And anyway, it'll be a terrible bore. And what good will it do?" **lf**

David Berreby has written for The New York Times Magazine, Discover, The Sciences, *and the* Village Voice, *among other publications.*

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THIS SEMIOTICIAN WENT TO MARKET

Continued from page 66

ic Northrop Frye, whom he discovered while hanging around the Cleveland poetry workshop circuit. These days his favorite semiotician is Eco; Verba counsels colleagues and clients to read Eco's *Theory of Semiotics.* "I just tell them to picture the word 'ad' or 'product' where Eco writes 'sign,' " he says, "and everything else in the book will make sense." Verba is particularly enamored of the idea of a chain of interpretants—Eco's notion that, simply put, every association leads to another, and that to another, and so on. (A coffee cup, for instance, might be associated with "work" in a person's mind; "work," in turn, would be associated with lots of other things—the smell of Xerox machines, perhaps, or an aching back, or morning—and each of those in turn with many more.) Realizing this is useful when running focus groups, Verba says—it makes you look for not just one connotation of a product but also the connotations of that connotation, and then the connotations behind *them.* "There was a term in the early eighties," Verba says, "'semiotic smell,' which implied not that semiotics stunk but that someone who was keen on the theory would begin to sense when there was something to pursue behind a snippet of dialogue."

Verba keeps three bookshelves of semiotic theory at work, but rolls out the big theory guns only every eighteen months or so, when appropriate. One such occasion was his analysis of beer: he found that imported-beer drinkers think of their beer as more natural than the nasty, chemical stuff made in America. "Nature versus culture!" Verba said to himself. "The *classic* Lévi-Strauss mythic opposition!" He proceeded to look for other oppositions in the imported-beer–drinker transcripts and found them—intellectual/nonintellectual; potent/weak. Verba collected an assortment of the positive connotations imported beer carried for its consumers, and then decided which of these were being underutilized by his client.

IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS OR SO, SEMIOTICS has penetrated Madison Avenue. Chris Wright-Isaac, associate director of corporate research at Young & Rubicam, says she uses semiotics "all the time." Ignazio Puccio, executive director of strategic planning at J. Walter Thompson, says he practices a kind of unsystematic "grass-roots semiotics." Myra Stark, director of creative research and consumer insights at Saatchi & Saatchi, has been interested in semiotics for years, and regrets that the dearth of properly credentialed semioticians in America (in Europe you can get a Ph.D. in semiotics) prevents the discipline from becoming more acceptable in advertising. Jennifer Smith, associate project director at Faith Popcorn's Brain Reserve, got quite defensive when asked if she used semiotics. "I'm not quite sure of the reason we don't use it, but we just don't," she said. "We have been talking to people about it. It's the new word around town, so of course we want to keep on top of it."

Semiotics is even becoming acceptable in business schools. Ever since Jean Umiker-Sebeok, an associate scholar at the University of Indiana at Bloomington (and also the wife of leading American semiotician Thomas Sebeok), and Sidney Levy, chair of the marketing department at Northwestern, held a semiotics and marketing conference in the summer of 1986, semiotics has become something of a fringe phenomenon in marketing departments. Its proponents are almost all specialists in consumer behavior (already the soft, qualitative side of marketing), and they all seem to know one another. There's David Mick at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who used to put together a newsletter with Umiker-Sebeok called *Marketing Signs.* There's Morris Holbrook at Columbia. There's Elizabeth Hirschman at Rutgers-New Brunswick, who has been hired as a consultant by a number of firms, including Saatchi & Saatchi. A few of these people have recently been branching out into the increasingly unlikely territories of hermeneutics, phenomenology, and critical theory. Craig Thompson, an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, assigns Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in his graduate seminars and has published several papers applying existential phenomenology to consumer choice. (This last involves eschewing the conventional, Cartesian ambition of market research—objective data, generalized into theories about why consumers do the things they do—and confining yourself to interpreting subjective accounts of consuming experience: what might be called shopping-in-the-world.)

Thompson says he occasionally suffers a moral twinge in the line of duty: for example, when he was investigating what it is about their body that makes people insecure and anxious, and he got a call from a cosmetics company that wanted to use the information (he didn't give it to them). On the whole, though, American semiotic marketers and marketing professors are free from the plagues of conscience that afflict the people at Semiotic Solutions. This is partly because in the United States semiotics has retained its formal quality, and has been only slightly affected by the postwar Marxism that politicized semiotics in England and informed Barthes's *Mythologies.*

But back at Ossian Mews, Evans's conscience, at least, has yet to be seduced by the attractions of capitalism. Then again, Evans seems to be the kind of guy who worries, morally, about most things. Lately he has been wrestling with an embarrassing, private love of his, trying to figure out a way to explain it to himself so it doesn't seem suspicious. "My favorite television program," Evans confessed to me, "is *Beavis and Butt-head.* I think it's absolutely brilliant. And I can't justify that. I could rationalize it by saying, as a literary critic might say: *Beavis and Butt-head is not decadent realism, it is an exposure of decadent realism.* But that's not why I like it. I can't find any way of making it worthy in my own mind. I just think it's hilariously funny." lf

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Center for Media, Culture and History
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RUTGERS

CENTER FOR THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE
announces
ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION FELLOWSHIPS
1995-1996

The Rutgers University interdisciplinary Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture announces a competition for Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowships on the topic, "Cultures and Politics of Reproduction." The awards for the 1995-1996 Rockefeller Fellowships are for $32,000.

The Center has received a three-year Rockefeller Foundation grant for its project, "Cultures and Environments in the Public Sphere." This year's grant is intended to support research on a broad range of topics regarding the culture and politics of reproduction, including areas related to:

- conception and fertility (abortion, sterilization abuse, reproductive technologies, eugenics, surrogacy, sperm and egg donation, etc.)
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- reproduction and representation: the social construction of motherhood/maternity and fatherhood/paternity (in visual arts and technologies, literature, popular culture, scientific discourse, legal discourse, media, etc.)

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All fellows will be expected to participate and present their work in Center seminars, which meet weekly throughout the academic year. Requests for applications should be received no later than January 1, 1995. Applications are due January 14, 1995.

Contact **Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture, Rutgers University**
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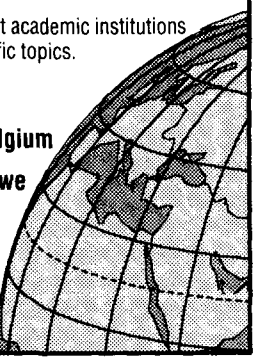

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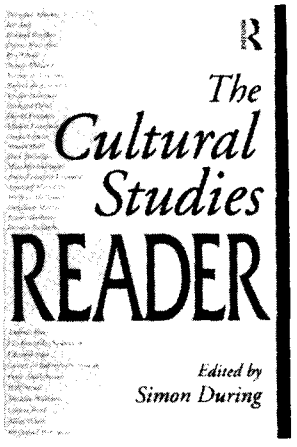

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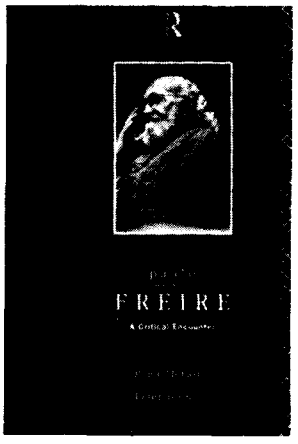

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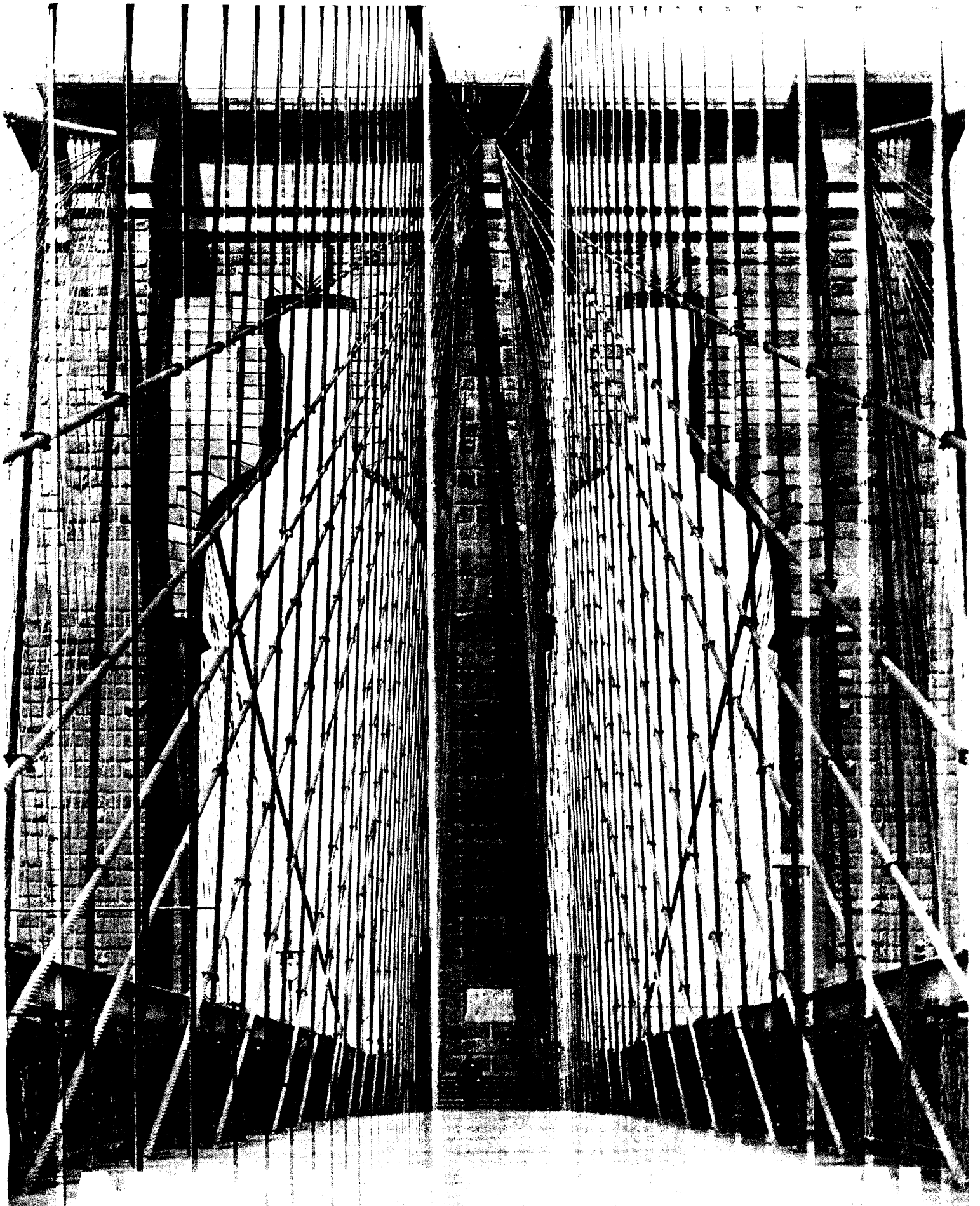

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